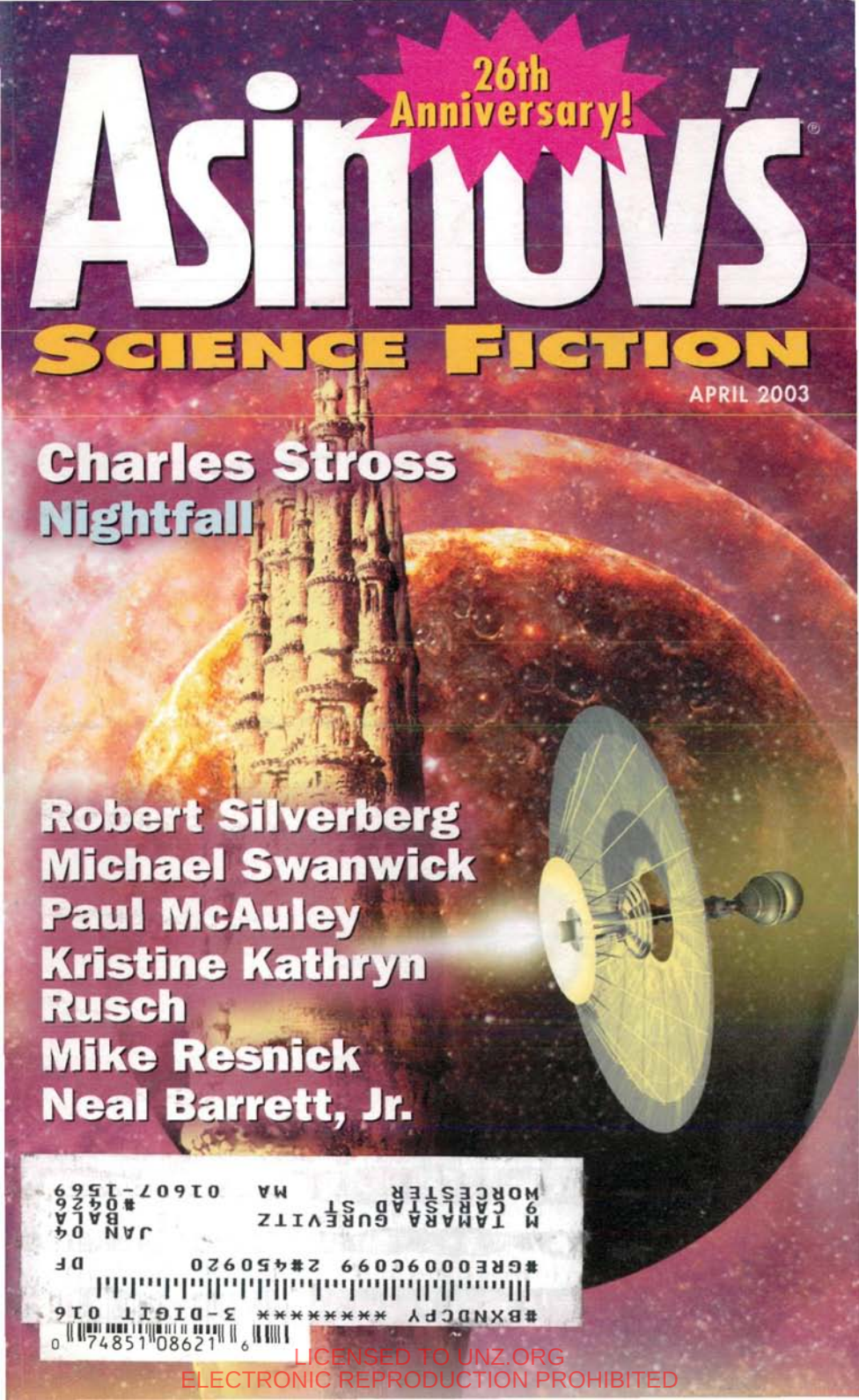

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Asimov's Science Fiction

APRIL 2003

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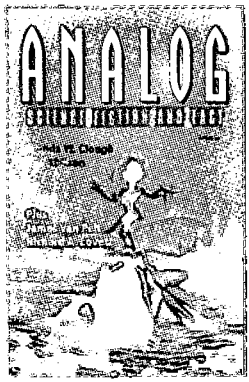

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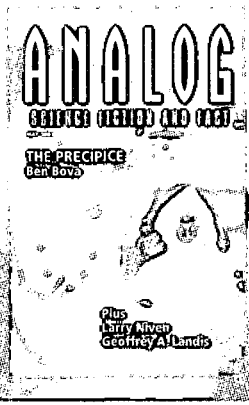

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

WRITERS' TOOLS

A few months ago I read, for the first time, Leo Tolstoy's immense novel *War and Peace*—a project I had been postponing for some fifty years. My copy of the book, which I have owned since I was a sophomore in college, is 1130 pages long—big pages, small type. It took me about three weeks to read it, three exceedingly intense weeks. The book made every bit as profound an impression on me as I had expected it to, and, in the stunned aftermath, I went on to gather a little information about how Tolstoy had gone about writing it.

I learned, for instance, that he had spent five years doing so—from 1863 to 1868—that he had revised constantly even as sections of the book were being set in type, producing innumerable drafts, and that (because his handwriting was so terrible, and he insisted on scribbling extensive last-minute revisions all over his galley proofs, writing between the lines and up and down the margins and on the backs of the pages as well, often scratching out his corrections to replace them with others) his wife Sonya served as his amanuensis, copying each version of the manuscript out in legible form. All in all, Mme. Tolstoy copied out *War and Peace* SEVEN FULL TIMES in those five years.

In longhand. In Cyrillic script.

My heart went out to her. The thought of simply reading *War and Peace* seven times in five years, let alone copying it all out by hand, shook me to the core. And it set me thinking about the manuscripts of books, and what authors (and sometimes their wives) go through in order to prepare them.

Tolstoy, of course, lived long before the era of computers. Nor did the devoted Mme. Tolstoy have access to a typewriter. Her husband, who grew cantankerously ascetic with age, had always detested modern machinery of all kinds, declaring in the epilogue to *War and Peace* that "The diffusion of printed matter" was "the most powerful weapon of ignorance."

Tolstoy could not have purchased a typewriter even if he had wanted one during the time he was writing *War and Peace.* But primitive versions of the device already existed. An English engineer, Henry Mill, had actually patented "an artificial machine or method for the impressing or transcribing of letters singly or progressively one after another," as early as 1714, though he doesn't seem to have built a working model. Various inventors—an Austrian, a Swiss, an Italian, a Frenchman—did produce working typewriters later in the eighteenth century, and whole platoons of writing machines had been devised by 1850—seven in France, three or four in the United States, several in England, etc. But the first practical one, the first one actually to be manufactured and placed on the market, was the one devised by Christopher Latham

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Sholes of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in a series of stages beginning in 1867 and first offered for sale in 1873 by the Remington Company, then best known for making guns, sewing machines, and farm machinery.

They were expensive gadgets—the initial price was $125, which is the equivalent in modern purchasing power of at least eight or ten thousand dollars—and there were very few buyers at first. One early adopter was the writer Samuel Langhorne Clemens, who is better known to us as Mark Twain. He saw a Remington on display in 1874 and bought it immediately. On December 9, 1874, he sent this typewritten letter to his brother Orion:

DEAR BROTHER:

I AM TRYING TO GET THE HANG OF THIS NEW FANGLED WRITING MACHINE, BUT I AM NOT MAKING A SHINING SUCCESS OF IT. HOWEVER THIS IS THE FIRST ATTEMPT I HAVE EVER MADE & YET I PERCEIVE I SHALL SOON & EASILY ACQUIRE A FINE FACILITY IN ITS USE. . . . THE MACHINE HAS SEVERAL VIRTUES. I BELIEVE IT WILL PRINT FASTER THAN I CAN WRITE. ONE MAY LEAN BACK IN HIS CHAIR & WORK IT. IT PILES AN AWFUL STACK OF WORDS ON ONE PAGE. IT DON'T MUSS THINGS OR SCATTER INK BLOTS AROUND. . . .

YOUR BROTHER,

SAM

And Mark Twain's next novel, *Tom Sawyer,* which appeared in 1876, went to his publisher in typewritten form—the first typewritten book manuscript in history. (Though some scholars believe that the distinction belongs to *Life on the Mississippi,* which dates from 1883.) Either way, Mark Twain was certainly the first novelist to turn in a typewritten manuscript.

The concept took firm hold. For the next century, more or less, publishers would insist on typewritten manuscripts—double-spaced, if you please, and typed on just one side of the page. About 1980, when writers began to shift from typewriters to word-processing computers, the technology of manuscript preparation underwent a significant change, but even then manuscripts continued to follow the traditional format once they were printed out; the big difference for the writer was in the way words could be manipulated electronically *before* any manuscript was produced, not in the production of the manuscript itself.

One of the first science fiction writers to switch over to the computer was the oldest guy in our crowd, Jack Williamson, who was approaching the age of seventy-five when he began using a Radio Shack computer in the 1980s. Most of the rest of us were still making do with typewriters then, although within a few years computer use had become almost universal in SFdom. The computers themselves, though, were a wildly variable lot. The younger, less solvent writers went in for miniature jobs like the Osborne and the Kaypro, which look like quaint museum pieces today. At the other end of the spectrum was the vast, room-filling device that those two plutocrats, Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, used to create their best-selling novels. Everyone else was somewhere in between, and, since each make of computer tended to use an idiosyncratic operating system, nobody's computer was compatible

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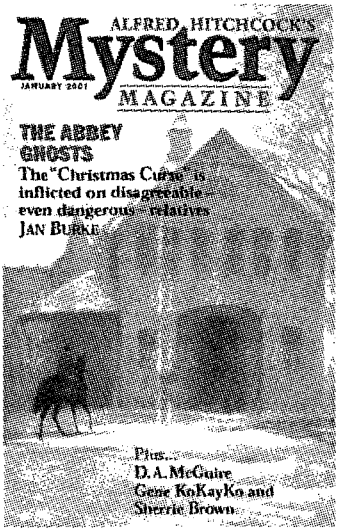

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with anybody else's, so the idea of sending your manuscript in digital form to your publisher was unworkable.

All that began to change with the arrival of the IBM PC and the imitative PC models that other manufacturers produced, and the simultaneous coming to dominance of the DOS operating system. Before long things were so standardized—everyone used either a PC or a Mac—that publishers started to prefer, and then to insist, that writers submit their work in a digital version (on diskettes or via e-mail) that could go straight into type, though they usually like to see conventional hard copy as well.* (Still called a "manuscript," I suppose, although that word is derived from Latin words meaning "that which is written by hand.")

Just about every writer uses a computer these days, and submits his work in electronic form with or without accompanying manuscript. (Harlan Ellison, who abhors computers, still writes on a typewriter, but he must be among the last of his kind.)

And yet we computer-users all have our little variations on the theme.

Jack Vance, for example, wrote his books in longhand for many years, and his wife Norma, in true Tolstoyan fashion, typed them into manuscript form. About fifteen years ago Vance switched to a computer, but, because his eyesight had begun to fail, he had a special screen rigged that projected his material at two or three times normal size; and eventually, when he could no longer even see his keyboard, a friend mounted big wax templates over the keys to enable him to find his way to the function keys and other such accessories, creating a unique bit of writing apparatus.

Then there's Frederik Pohl, whose writing discipline requires him to write a minimum of four pages a day, day in and day out, wherever he may be. His manuscripts are produced on a computer these days, too. But Pohl has always been a considerable traveler, and—rather than carry a laptop wherever he goes—he takes good old low-tech pads of yellow paper with him. One year in the late 1980s the Silverbergs and the Pohls traveled through Italy together, and I remember Fred doggedly setting down his four pages via pen and paper each day at the hotel while the rest of us went out to visit Byzantine mosaics and baroque cathedrals.

(I also travel a great deal. But I never, never, NEVER write while away from home. Since 1982 I've used a succession of computers for my work, but I take no laptops with me on my overseas journeys, nor pads of yellow paper, nor anything else that might tempt me into performing acts of fiction.)

Joe Haldeman's working methods are particularly unusual. He is a relatively slow writer whose work requires little rewriting; and, although he's certainly computer-savvy, he came to see that a computer wouldn't allow him to compose any more rapidly than if he did it by hand. Since he dislikes typing and enjoys the physical feel of longhand, he does the first drafts of his novels in bound blank books, rotating through a couple of dozen foun-

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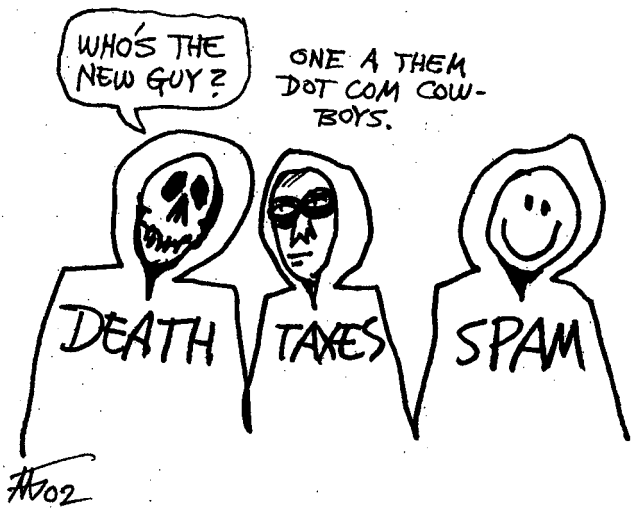
tain pens with calligraphic nibs. (Joe learned calligraphy from the artist Jack Gaughan in the 1960s and his handwriting is *most* distinctive.) He uses a different color ink each day, which enables him to keep track of how much work is done on any particular day. Eventually he produces a first draft of unusual beauty, which some collector will eventually cherish. It's a true first draft, too, whereas what the rest of us produce undergoes constant ongoing revision as we scroll back and forth, so that early versions quickly vanish beneath the cursor's tread. Once the book is complete, Joe's wife Gay—another dedicated literary wife!—types his text into a "working draft" computer file, which Joe reads periodically, entering revisions by keyboard in the usual modern manner. What the publisher gets is a conventional-looking manuscript printout and the by now customary electronic file. What the collector of Haldeman manuscripts eventually will get is a thing of almost medieval beauty.

I doubt that Leo Tolstoy, if he had lived past 1910, would ever have reconciled himself to a computer. But he did finally come to let a typewriter into the house, though he never would go near it himself. Late in the nineteenth century the Remington typewriter people began to use photographs of celebrities to market their product, and one of their most famous shots is one of Tolstoy and his daughter Alexandra. The great man, scowling even more irascibly than was his norm, is dictating something to Alexandra—whose fingers rest on the keyboard of Remington's most recent model. ❍



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NIGHTFALL

Charles Stross

Charles Stross lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, where he destroys laptop keyboards for a living. The first story in this series, "Lobsters" (June 2001), was shortlisted for the Hugo award in 2002. His latest book, *Singularity Sky*, is due out from Ace Books in August. Another novel, *The Atrocity Archive*, will be published by Golden Gryphon in the fall.

A synthetic gemstone the size of a Coke can falls through silent darkness. The night is quiet as the grave, colder than midwinter on Pluto. Gossamer sails as fine as soap bubbles droop, the gust of sapphire laser light that inflated them long since darkened; ancient starlight picks out the outline of a huge planet-like body beneath the jewel-and-cobweb corpse of the starwhisp.

Eight years have passed since the good ship *Field Circus* slipped into close orbit around the frigid brown dwarf Hyundai +4904/-56. Five years have gone by since the launch lasers of the Ring Imperium shut down without warning, stranding the light sail powered craft three light years from home. There has been no response from the router, the strange alien artifact in orbit around the brown dwarf, since the crew of the starwhisp uploaded themselves through its strange quantum entanglement interface for transmission to whatever alien network it connects to. In fact, nothing happens; nothing save the slow trickle of seconds, as a watchdog timer counts down the moments remaining until it is due to resurrect stored snapshots of the crew, on the assumption that their uploaded copies are beyond help.

Meanwhile, outside the light cone—

Amber jolts into wakefulness, as if from a nightmare. She sits bolt upright, a thin sheet falling from her chest; air circulating around her back chills her rapidly, cold sweat evaporating. She mutters aloud, unable to subvocalize, "where am I—oh. A bedroom. How did I get here?" *mumble*. "Oh, I see." Her eyes widen in horror. *It's not a dream*. . . .

"Greetings, human Amber," says a ghost-voice that seems to come from nowhere: "I see you are awake. Would you like anything?"

Amber rubs her eyes tiredly. Leaning against the bedstead, she glances around cautiously. She takes in a bedside mirror, her reflection in it: a young woman, gaunt in the manner of those whose genome bears the p53

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calorie-restriction hack, she has disheveled blonde hair and dark eyes. She could pass for a dancer or a soldier; not, perhaps, a queen. "What's going on? Where am I? Who are you, and *what am I doing in your head?*"

Her eyes narrow. Analytical intellect comes to the fore as she takes stock of her surroundings. "The router," she mutters. Structures of strange matter in orbit around a brown dwarf, scant light years from Earth. "How long ago did we come through?" Glancing round, she sees a room walled in slabs of close-fitting stone. A window bay is recessed into them, after the style of crusader castles many centuries in the past, but there's no glass in it—just a blank white screen. The only furniture in the room, besides a Persian carpet on the cold flagstones, is the bed she sits upon. That, and the idiot gun that hovers just beneath the ceiling. She's reminded of a scene from an old movie, Kubrick's enigma; this whole setup has got to be deliberate, and it isn't funny.

"I'm waiting," she announces, and leans back against the headboard.

"According to our records this reaction indicates that you are now fully self-aware," says the ghost. "This is good. You have not been conscious for a very long time: explanations will be complex and discursive. Can I offer you refreshments? What would you like?"

"Coffee, if you have it. Bread and hummus. Something to wear." Amber crosses her arms, abruptly self-conscious. "I'd prefer to have management ackles to this universe, though. As realities go, it's a bit lacking in furniture." Which isn't entirely true—it seems to have a comprehensive, human-friendly biophysics model. Her eyes focus on her left forearm; tanned skin and a puckered dime of scar tissue records a youthful accident with a pressure seal in Jovian orbit. Amber freezes for a moment. Her lips move in silence, but she's locked into place in this universe, unable to split or conjoin nested realities just by calling subroutines that have been spliced into the corners of her mind since she was a teenager. Finally she asks, "How long have I been dead?"

"Longer than you were alive, by orders of magnitude," says the ghost. A tray laden with pita breads, hummus, and olives congeals from the air above her bed and a wardrobe appears at one side of the room. "I can begin the explanation now or wait for you to finish eating. Which would you prefer?"

Amber glances about again, then fixes on the white screen in the window bay. "Give it to me right now. I can take it," she says, quietly bitter. "I like to understand my mistakes as soon as possible," she adds.

"We-us can tell that you are a human of determination," says the ghost, a hint of pride entering its voice. "That is a good thing, human Amber. You will need all of your resolve if you are going to survive here. . . ."

It is the time of repentance in a temple beside a tower that looms above a dry plain, and the thoughts of the priest who lives in the tower are tinged with regret. It is Ashura, the tenth day of Muhurram, according to a real-time clock still tuned to the pace of a different era: the one thousand, three hundred and fortieth anniversary of the martyrdom of the third Imam, the Sayyid ash-Shuhada.

The priest of the tower has spent an indefinite time in prayer—locked

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in an eternal moment of meditation and recitation—and now, as the sun, vast and red, burns low above the horizon of the infinite desert, his thoughts drift toward the present. Ashura is a very special day, a day of atonement for collective guilt, evil committed through inactivity; but it is in Sadeq's nature to look outward toward the future. This is, he knows, a failing—but he is a member of that generation of the Shi'ite clergy that reacted to the excesses of the previous century: the generation that withdrew the *ulama* from temporal power, retreated from the velyat i-faqih of Khomenei and his successors, and left government to the people. Sadeq's focus, his driving obsession in theology, is a program of re-appraisal of eschatology and cosmology. Here in a tower of white sun-baked clay, on an endless plain that exists only in the imaginary spaces of a starship the size of a soft drink can, the priest spends his processor cycles in contemplation of one of the most vicious problems ever to confront a *mujtahid*: the Fermi paradox.

Sadeq finishes his evening devotions in near silence, then stands, stretches as is his wont, and leaves the small and lonely courtyard at the base of the tower. The gate—made of wrought iron, warmed by sunlight—squeals slightly as he opens it. Glancing at the upper hinge, he frowns slightly, willing it clean and whole. The underlying physics model acknowledges his access controls: a thin rim of red around the pin turns silvery-fresh, and the squeaking stops dead. Closing the gate behind him, Sadeq enters the tower.

He climbs with a heavy, even tread, a spiral staircase snaking ever upward above him. Narrow slit-windows line the outer wall of the staircase: through each of them he sees a different world. Out there, nightfall in the month of Ramadan. And through the next, green misty skies and a horizon too close by far. Sadeq carefully avoids thinking about the implications of this manifold space. Coming from prayer, from a sense of the sacred, he doesn't want to lose his proximity to his faith. He's far enough from home as it is, and there is much to consider—he is surrounded by strange and curious ideas, all but lost in a corrosive desert of faith.

At the top of the staircase, Sadeq comes to a door of aged wood bound in iron. It doesn't belong here: it's a cultural and architectural anomaly. The handle is a loop of black iron: Sadeq regards it as if it's the head of an asp, poised to strike. Nevertheless he reaches out and turns the handle, steps across the threshold into a palace out of fantasy.

None of this is real, he reminds himself. *It's no more real than an illusion conjured by one of the djinni of the thousand nights and one night.* Nevertheless, he can't save himself from smiling at the scene—a sardonic smile of self-deprecating humor, tempered by frustration.

Sadeq's captors have stolen his soul and locked it—him—in a very strange prison, a temple with a tower that rises all the way to paradise. It's the whole classical litany of mediaevalist desires, distilled from fifteen hundred years of literature; colonnaded courtyards, cool pools lined with rich mosaics, rooms filled with every imaginable dumb matter luxury, endless banquets awaiting his appetite—and occupied by dozens of beautiful un-women, eager to fulfill his every fantasy. Sadeq, being human, has fantasies by the dozen: but he doesn't dare permit himself to succumb

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to this temptation. *I'm not dead*, he reasons, *therefore how can I be in paradise? Therefore this must be a false paradise, a temptation sent to lead me astray. Probably. Unless I* am *dead, because Allah, peace be unto him, considers a human soul separated from its body to be dead. But if that's so, isn't uploading a sin? In which case this can't be paradise. Besides which, this paradox is so* puerile!

Sadeq has always been inclined to philosophical enquiry, and his vision of the afterlife is more cerebral than most, involving ideas as questionable within the framework of Islam as those of Teilhard de Chardin were to the twentieth century Catholic church. If there's one key indicator of a false paradise in his eschatology it's two-and-seventy brainlessly beautiful houris waiting to do his bidding. So it follows that he can't really be dead. Except . . .

The whole question of reality is so vexing that Sadeq does what he does every night. He strides heedlessly across priceless works of art, barging hastily through courtyards and passageways, ignoring niches in which nearly naked supermodels lie with their legs apart, climbing stairs—until he comes to a small unfurnished room with a single high window in one wall. There he sits on the floor, legs crossed, meditating: not in prayer, but in a more tightly focused ratiocination. Every false night—for there is no way to know how fast time is passing, outside this cyberspace pocket—Sadeq sits and *thinks*, grappling with Descartes' demon in the solitude of his own mind. And the question he asks himself every night is the same: *can I tell if this is the true hell? And if it is not, how can I escape?*

The ghost tells Amber that she has been dead for just under a third of a million years. She has been reinstantiated from storage—and has died again—many times in the intervening period, but she has no memory of this; she is a fork from the main bough, and the other branches expired in lonely isolation.

The business of resurrection does not, in and of itself, distress Amber unduly. Born in the post-Turing era, she merely finds some aspects of the ghost's description dissatisfyingly incomplete: like saying she was been drugged and brought hither without stating whether by plane, train, or automobile.

She doesn't have a problem with the ghost's assertion that she is nowhere near Earth, either—indeed, that she is approximately eighty thousand light years away. When she and the others took the risk of uploading themselves through the router they found in orbit around Hyundai +4904/-56, they'd understood that they could end up anywhere or nowhere. But the idea that she's still within the light cone of her departure strikes her as odd. The router is part of a network of self-replicating instantaneous communicators, spawning and spreading between the cold brown dwarf stars that litter the galaxy. She'd somehow expected to be much further from home by now.

Somewhat more disturbing is the ghost's assertion that the human genotype has rendered itself extinct at least twice, that its home planet is unknown, and that Amber is nearly the only human left in the public archives. At this point she interrupts: "I hardly see what this has to do

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with me!" She blows across her coffee glass; "I'm *dead,*" she explains, with an undertone of knowing sarcasm in her voice. "Remember? I just got here. A thousand seconds ago, subjective time, I was in the control node of a starship, discussing what to do with the router we were in orbit around. We agreed to send ourselves through it, as a trade mission. Then I woke up in bed here in the umpty-zillionth century, wherever and whatever *here* is—without access to any reality ackles or augmentation, I can't even tell whether this is real or an embedded simulation. You're going to have to explain *why* you need an old version of me before I can make sense of my situation—and I can tell you, I'm not going to help you until I know who you are. And speaking of that, what about the others? Where are they? I wasn't the only one, you know?"

The ghost freezes in place for a moment, and Amber feels a watery rush of terror: *have I gone too far?* she wonders.

"There has been an unfortunate accident," the ghost announces portentously. It morphs from a translucent copy of Amber's own body into the outline of a human skeleton, elaborate bony extensions simulating an osteosarcoma of more-than-lethal proportions. "Consensus-we believe that you are best positioned to remediate the situation. This applies within the demilitarized zone."

"Demilitarized. . . ?" Amber shakes her head, pauses to sip her coffee. "What do you mean? What *is* this place?"

The ghost flickers again, adopting an abstract rotating hypercube as its avatar. "This space we occupy is a manifold adjacent to the demilitarized zone. The demilitarized zone is a space outside our core reality, itself exposed to entities that cross freely through our firewall, journeying to and from the network outside. We-us use the DMZ to establish informational value of migrant entities, sapient currency units and the like. We-us banked you upon arrival against future options trades in human species futures."

"Currency!" Amber doesn't know whether to be amused or horrified—both reactions seem appropriate. "Is that how you treat all your visitors?"

The ghost ignores her question. "There is a runaway semiotic excursion underway in the zone. We-us believe only you can fix it. If you agree to do so we will exchange value, pay, reward cooperation, expedite remuneration, manumit, repatriate."

Amber drains her coffee cup. "Have you ever entered into economic interactions with me, or humans like me, before?" she asks. "If not, why should I trust you? If so, why have you revived me? Are there any more experienced instances of myself running around here?" She raises an eyebrow at the ghost. "This looks like the start of an abusive relationship."

The ghost continues to sidestep her attempts to work out where she stands. It flickers into transparency, grows into a hazy window on a landscape of impossible shapes. Clouds sprouting trees drift above a landscape of green, egg-curved hills and cheesecake castles. "Nature of excursion: alien intelligence is loose in the DMZ," it asserts. "Alien is applying invalid semiotics to complex structures designed to sustain trade. You know this alien, Amber. We require solution. Slay the monster, we will give you line of credit. Your own reality to control, insight into trade

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arrangements, augmented senses, ability to travel. Can even upgrade you to you-we consensus, if desired."

"This monster." Amber leans forward: it's her turn to ignore what she feels to be a spurious offer. *Upgrade me to a ghost fragment of an alien group mind?* she wonders dismissively. "what is this alien?" She feels blind and unsure, stripped of her ability to spawn threads of herself to pursue complex inferences. "Is it part of the Wunch?"

"Datum unknown. It-them came with you," says the ghost. "Accidentally reactivated some seconds since now. Now it runs amok in the demilitarized zone. Help us, Amber. Save our hub or we will be cut off from the network. If that happens, you will die with we-us. Save us. . . ."

A single memory belonging to someone else unwinds, faster than a guided missile and far more deadly.

Amber, aged eleven, is a gawky, long-limbed child loose on the streets of Hong Kong, a yokel tourist viewing the hotcore of the Middle Kingdom. This is her first and final vacation before the Franklin Trust straps her inside the payload pod of a Shenzhou spaceplane and blasts her into orbit from Xinkiang. She's free for the time being, albeit mortgaged to the tune of several million Euros; she's a little taikonaut to be, ready to work for the long years in Jupiter orbit it will take her to pay off the self-propelled options web that owns her. It's not exactly slavery: thanks to Dad's corporate shell-game, she doesn't have to worry about Mom chasing her, a cyanide-eyed abductress with feudal spawn-indenture rights in mind. And now she's got a little pocket money, and a room in the Hilton, and her own personal Franklin remote to keep her company, and she's gonna do that eighteenth century enlightenment tourist shit and do it *right*.

Because this is her last day at liberty in the randomly evolved biosphere.

China is where it's at in this decade, hot and dense and full of draconian punishments for the obsolescent. Nationalist fervor to catch up with the West has been replaced by consumerist fervor to own the latest fad gadgets, the most picturesque tourist souvenirs from the quaintly old-fashioned streets of America, the fastest hottest smartest upgrades for body and soul. Hong Kong is hotter and faster than just about anywhere else in China, or in the whole damn world for that matter; this is a place where tourists from Tokyo gawp, cowed and future-shocked by the glamor of high technology living.

Walking along Jardine's Bazaar—*more like Jardine's bizarre*, she thinks—exposes Amber to a blast of humid noise. Geodesic domes sprout like skeletal mushrooms from the glass and chrome roofs of the expensive shopping malls and luxury hotels, threatening to float away on the hot sea breeze. There are no airliners roaring in and out of Kai Tak any more, no burnished aluminum storm clouds to rain round-eyed passengers on the shopping malls and fish markets of Kowloon and the New Territories. In these tense later days of the War Against Unreason, impossible new shapes move in the sky; Amber gapes upward as a Shenyang F-30 climbs at a near-vertical angle, a mess of incomprehensibly curved flight surfaces vanishing to a perspective point that defies radar as well as eyeballs. The

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Chinese—fighter? missile platform? supercomputer?—is heading out over the South China Sea, to join the endless patrol that guards the border of the capitalist world against the Hosts of Denial, the Trouble out of Wa'hab.

For the moment, she's merely a human child: Amber's subconscious is offlined by the presence of forceful infowar daemons, the Chinese government censorbots suppressing her cognition of their deadliest weapons. And in the seconds while her mind is as empty as a sucked egg, a thin-faced man with blue hair shoves her in the small of her back and snatches at her shoulder bag.

"Hey!" she yells, stumbling. Her mind's a blur, optics refusing to respond and grab a physiology model of her assailant. It's the frozen moment, the dead zone when online coverage fails, and the thief is running away before she can catch her balance or try to give chase. Plus, with her extensions offline she doesn't know how to yell "stop, thief!" in Cantonese.

Seconds later, the fighter is out of visual range and the state censorship field lets up. "Get him, you bastards!" she screams, but the curious shoppers simply stare at the rude foreign child: an elderly woman brandishes a disposable phonecam at her and screeches something back. Amber picks up her feet and runs. Already she can feel the subsonics from her luggage growling at her guts—it's going to make a scene if she doesn't catch up in time. Shoppers scatter, a woman with a baby carriage almost running her down in her panic to get away from it.

By the time Amber reaches her terrified shoulder bag, the thief has disappeared: she has to spend almost a minute petting the scared luggage before it stops screeching and retracts its spines enough for her to pick it up. And by that time there's a robocop in attendance. "Identify yourself," it rasps in synthetic English.

Amber stares at her bag in horror: there's a huge gash in the side, and it's far too light. *It's gone,* she thinks, despairingly: *he stole it*. "Help," she says faintly, holding up her bag for the distant policeman looking through the robot's eyes. "Been stolen."

"What item missing?" asks the robot.

"My Hello Kitty," she says, batting her eyelashes, mendacity full-on at maximum utilization, prodding her conscience into submission, warning of dire consequences should the police discover the true nature of her pet cat: "My kitten's been stolen! Can you help me?"

"Certainly," says the cop, resting a reassuring hand on her shoulder—a hand that turns into a steel armband, as it pushes her into a van and notifies her in formally stilted language that she is under arrest on suspicion of shoplifting and will be required to produce certificates of authenticity and a fully compliant ownership audit for all items in her possession if she wants to prove her innocence.

By the time Amber's meatbrain realizes that she is being politely arrested, some of her external threads have already started yelling for help and her m-commerce trackers have identified the station she's being taken to by way of click-thru trails and an obliging software license manager. Some of them spawn agents to go notify the Franklin trustees, Amnesty International, and the Space and Freedom Party. As she's being booked into a cerise-and-turquoise juvenile offenders holding room by a middle-

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aged policewoman, the phones on the front desk are already ringing with enquiries from lawyers, fast food vendors, and a particularly on-the-ball celebrity magazine that's been tracking her father's connections. "Can you help me get my cat back?" she asks the policewoman earnestly.

"Name," the officer reads, eyes flickering from the simultaneous translation: "to please wax your identity stiffly."

"My cat has been stolen," Amber insists.

"Your cat?" The cop looks perplexed, then exasperated. Dealing with foreign teenagers who answer questions with gibberish isn't in her repertoire. "We are asking your name?"

"No," says Amber. "It's my cat. It has been stolen. My *cat* has been *stolen*."

"Aha! Your papers, please?"

"Papers?" Amber is growing increasingly worried. She can't feel the outside world; there's a Faraday cage wrapped around the holding cell and it's claustrophobically quiet in here. "I want my cat! Now!"

The cop snaps her fingers, then reaches into her own pocket and produces an ID card, which she points to insistently. "Papers," she repeats. "Or else."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Amber wails.

The cop stares at her oddly. "Wait." She rises and leaves, and a minute later returns with a thin-faced man in a business suit and wire-rimmed glasses that glow faintly.

"You are making a scene," he says, rudely and abruptly. "What is your name? Tell me truthfully or you'll spend the night here."

Amber bursts into tears. "My *cat's* been stolen," she chokes out.

The detective and the cop obviously don't know how to deal with this scene; it's freaking them out, with its overtones of emotional messiness and sinister diplomatic entanglement. "You wait here," they say, and back out of the cell, leaving her alone with a plastic animatronic koala and a cheap Lebanese coffee machine.

The implications of her loss—of Aineko's abduction—are sinking in now, and Amber is weeping loudly and hopelessly. It's hard to deal with bereavement and betrayal at any age, and the cat has been her wisecracking companion and consolation for a year now, the rock of certainty that gave her the strength to break free from her crazy mother. To lose her cat to a body shop in Hong Kong, where she will probably be cut up for spare circuitry or turned into soup, is too horrible to contemplate. Filled with despair and hopeless anguish, Amber howls at the interrogation room walls while outside, trapped threads of her consciousness search for backups to synchronize with.

But after an hour, just as she's quieting down into a slough of raw despair, there's a knock—a knock!—at the door. An inquisitive head pops in. "Please to come with us?" It's the female cop with the bad translation ware. She takes in Amber's sobbing and *tsks* under her breath, but as Amber stands up and shambles toward her, she pulls back.

At the front desk of a cubicle farm full of police bureaucrats in various states of telepresence, the detective is waiting with a damp cardboard box wrapped in twine. "Please identify," he asks, snipping the string.

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Amber shakes her head, dizzy with the flow of threads homing in to synchronize their memories with her. "Is it—" she begins to ask as the lid comes apart, wet pulp disintegrating. A triangular head pops up, curiously, sniffing the air. Bubbles blow from brown-furred nostrils. "What took you so long?" asks the cat as she reaches into the box and picks her up, fur wet and matted with seawater.

"If you want me to go fix your alien, for starters I want you to give me reality alteration privileges," says Amber. "Then I want you to find the latest instances of everyone who came here with me—round up the usual suspects—and give *them* root privileges, too. Then we'll want access to the other embedded universes in the DMZ. Finally, I want guns. *Lots* of guns."

"That may be difficult," says the ghost. "Many other humans reached halting state long-since. Is at least one other still alive, but not accessible for duration of eschatological experiment in progress. Not all were recorded with version control engine; others were-are lost in DMZ. We-us can provide you with extreme access to the demilitarized zone, but query the need for kinetic energy weapons."

Amber sighs. "You guys really *are* media illiterates, aren't you?" She stands up and stretches, feeling a facsimile of sleep's enervation leaching from her muscles. "I'll also need my—" it's on the tip of her tongue: there's something missing. "Hang on. There's something I've forgotten." *Something important*, she thinks, puzzled. *Something that used to be around all the time that would . . . know? . . . purr? . . . help?* "Never mind," she hears her lips say. "This other human. I *really* want her. Non-negotiable. All right?"

"That may be difficult," repeats the ghost. "Entity is looping in a recursively confined universe."

"Eh?" Amber blinks at it. "Would you mind re-phrasing that? Or illustrating?"

"Illustration:" the ghost folds the air in the room into a glowing ball of plasma, shaped like a Klein bottle. Amber's eyes cross as she looks at it. "Closest reference from human historical database is Descartes' demon. This entity has retreated within a closed space but is now unsure whether it is objectively real or not. In any event, it refuses to interact."

"Well, can you get me into that space?" asks Amber. Pocket universes she can deal with; it's part and parcel of life as an upload. "Give me some leverage—"

"Risk may attach to this course of action," warns the ghost.

"I don't care," she says irritably. "Just *put* me there. It's someone I know, isn't it? Send me into her dream and I'll wake her up, okay?"

"Understood," says the ghost. "Prepare yourself."

Without any warning, Amber is somewhere else. She glances around, taking in an ornate mosaic floor, whitewashed walls set with open windows through which stars twinkle faintly in the night sky. The walls are stone, and she stands in a doorway to a room with nothing in it but a bed. Occupied by—

"Shit," she mumbles. "Who are you?" The young and incredibly, classi-

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cally beautiful woman in the bed looks at her vacantly, then rolls over on her side. She isn't wearing a stitch, she's completely hairless from the ears down, and her languid posture is one of invitation. "Yes?" Amber asks, "what is it?"

The woman on the bed beckons to her slowly. Amber shakes her head. "Sorry, that's just not my scene." She backs away into the corridor, unsteady but thoughtful. "This is some sort of male fantasy, isn't it? And a particularly puerile one at that." She looks around again. In one direction a corridor heads past more open doorways, and in the other it ends with a spiral staircase. Amber concentrates, trying to tell the universe to take her to the logical destination, but nothing happens. "Shit, looks like I'm going to have to do this the hard way. I wish—" she frowns. She was about to wish that *someone* else was here, but she can't remember who. So she takes a deep breath and heads toward the staircase.

"Up or down?" she asks herself. *Up*—it seems logical, if you're going to have a tower, to sleep up at the top of it. So she climbs the steps carefully, holding the spiraling rail. *I wonder who designed this space?* She wonders. *And what role am I supposed to fit into in their scenario?* On second thoughts, the latter question strikes her as laughable. *Wait 'til I give him an earful. . . .*

There's a plain wooden door at the top of the staircase, with a latch that isn't fastened. Amber pauses for a few seconds, nerving herself to confront a sleeper so wrapped in solipsism that he's built this sex-fantasy castle around himself. *I hope it isn't Pierre*, she thinks grimly as she pushes the door inward.

The room is bare and floored in wood. There's no furniture, just an open window set high in one wall. A man sits cross-legged and robed, with his back to her, mumbling quietly to himself and nodding slightly. Her breath catches as she realizes who it is. *Oh shit.* Her eyes widen. *Is* this *what's been inside his head all along?*

"I did not summon you," Sadeq says calmly, not turning round to look at her. "Go away, tempter. You aren't real."

Amber clears her throat. "Sorry to disappoint you, but you're wrong," she says. "We've got an alien monster to catch. Want to come hunting?"

Sadeq stops nodding. He sits up slowly, stretching his spine, then stands up and turns round. His eyes glint in the moonlight. "That's odd." He undresses her with his gaze. "You look like someone I used to know. You've never done that before."

"For fuck's sake!" Amber nearly explodes but catches herself after a moment. "What *is* this, a Solipsists United chapterhouse meeting?"

"I—" Sadeq looks puzzled. "I'm sorry, are you claiming to be *real?*"

"As real as you are." Amber reaches out and grabs a hand: he doesn't resist as she pulls him toward the doorway.

"You're the first visitor I've ever had." He sounds shocked.

"Listen, come *on*." She tugs him after her, down the spiral staircase to the floor below. "Do you *want* to stay here? Really?" She glances back at him. "What *is* this place?"

"Hell is a perversion of heaven," he says slowly, running the fingers of his free hand through his beard. Abruptly, he reaches out and grabs her

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around the waist, then yanks her toward him. "We'll have to *see* how real you are—" Amber, who is not used to this kind of treatment, responds by stomping on his instep and back-handing him hard.

"You're real!" he cries, as he falls back against the staircase. "Forgive me, please! I had to know—"

"Know *what*?" she snarls. "Lay one finger on me again and I'll leave you here to rot!" She's already spawning the ghost that will signal the alien outside to pull her out of this pocket universe: it's a serious threat.

"But I had to—wait. You have *free will*. You just demonstrated that." He's breathing heavily and looking up at her imploringly. "I'm *sorry*, I apologize! But I had to know whether you were another zombie. Or not."

"A zombie?" She looks round. Another living doll has appeared behind her, standing in an open doorway wearing a skin-tight leather suit with a cut-away crotch. She beckons to Sadeq invitingly. Another body wearing strategically placed strips of rubber mewls at her feet, writhing for attention. Amber raises an eyebrow in disgust. "You thought I was one of those?"

Sadeq nods. "They've gotten cleverer lately. Some of them can talk. I nearly mistook one for—" he shudders convulsively. "Unclean!"

"Unclean." Amber looks down at him thoughtfully. "This isn't really your personal paradise, is it?" After a moment, she holds out a hand to him. "Come on."

"I'm sorry I thought you were a zombie," he repeats sadly: then the ghost yanks them both back to the universe outside.

More memories converge on the present moment:

The Ring Imperium is a huge cluster of self-replicating robots that Amber has assembled in low Jupiter orbit, fueled by the mass and momentum of the small moon J-47 Barney, to provide a launching platform for the interstellar probe her father's business partners are helping her to build. It's also the seat of her court, the leading jurisprudential nexus in the outer solar system. Amber is the Queen here, arbitrator and ruler. And Sadeq is her judge and counsel.

A plaintiff Amber only knows as a radar blip thirty light-minutes away has filed a lawsuit in her court, alleging malfeasance, heresy, and barratry against a semi-sentient corporate pyramid scheme that arrived in Jovian space twelve million seconds ago and currently seems set on converting every other intelligence in the region to its peculiar meme-set. A whole bundle of multi-threaded counter-suits are dragging at her attention, in a counter-attack alleging that the light blip is in violation of copyright, patent, and trade secrecy laws by discussing the interloper's intentions.

Right now, Amber isn't home on the Ring to hear the case in person. She's left Sadeq behind to grapple with the balky mechanics of her legal system—tailor-designed to make corporate litigation a pain in the ass—while she drags Pierre off on a diplomatic visit to another Jovian colony, the Nursery Republic. Planted by the Franklin Trust's orphanage ship *Ernst Sanger*, the Nursery has grown over the past four years into a spindly snowflake three kilometers across. A slow-growing O'Neil cylinder sprouts from its hub: most of the inhabitants of the space station are less than two years old, precocious additions to the Trust's borganism.

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There's a piazza, paved with something not unlike rough marble, on the side of a hill that clings insecurely to the edge of a spinning cup. The sky is a black vastness overhead, wheeling slowly around a central axis lined up on Jupiter. Amber sprawls in a wicker chair, her legs stretched out before her and one arm flung across her forehead. The wreckage of an incredible meal is scattered across the tables around her. Torpid and full, she strokes the cat that lies curled in her lap. Pierre is off somewhere, touring one or another of the prototype ecosystems that one or another of the Borg's special-interest minds is testing. Amber, for her part, can't be bothered. She's just had a great meal, she doesn't have any lawsuits to worry about, everything back home is on the critpath, and quality time like this is so hard to come by—

"Do you keep in touch with your father?" asks Monica.

"Mm." The cat purrs quietly and Amber strokes its flank. "We email. Sometimes."

"I just wondered." Monica is the local Borg den mother, willowy and brown-eyed and with a deceptively lazy drawl—Yorkshire English overlaid with silicon-valley speak. "I hear from him, y'know. From time to time. He was talking about coming out here."

"What? To PeriJove?" Amber's eyes open in alarm: Aineko stops purring and looks round at Monica accusingly.

"Don't worry." Monica sounds vaguely amused. "He wouldn't cramp your style, I think."

"But, out here—" Amber sits up. "Damn," she says, quietly. "What got into *him?*"

"Middle-aged restlessness, my down-well sibs say." Monica shrugs. "This time, Annette didn't stop him. But he hasn't made up his mind to travel yet."

"Good. Then he might not—" Amber stops. "The phrase. *Made up his mind.* What exactly do you mean?"

Monica's smile mocks her for a few seconds before the older woman surrenders. "He's talking about uploading."

"Is that embarrassing, or what?" asks Ang. Amber glances at her, mildly annoyed, but Ang isn't looking her way. *So much for friends*, Amber thinks. Being queen of all you survey is a great way of breaking up peer relationships—

"He won't do it," Amber predicts. "Dad's burned out."

"He thinks he'll get it back if he optimizes himself for re-entrancy." Monica continues to smile. "I've been telling him it's just what he needs."

"I do *not* want my father bugging me. *Or* my mother. Memo to immigration control: no entry rights for Manfred Macx without clearance through the Queen's secretary."

"What did he do to get you so uptight?" asks Monica idly.

Amber sighs, and subsides. "Nothing. He's just so extropian it's embarrassing. Like, that was the last century's apocalypse. Y'know?"

"I think he was a really very forward-looking organic," Monica, speaking for the Franklin Borg, asserts. Amber looks away. *Pierre would get it*, she thinks. Pierre would understand her aversion to Manfred showing up. Pierre, too, wants to carve out his own niche without parents looking

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over his shoulders, although for very different reasons. She focuses on someone male and more-or-less mature—Nicky, she thinks, though she hasn't seen him for a long time—walking toward the piazza, bare-ass naked and beautifully tanned.

"Parents. What are they good for?" asks Amber, with all the truculence of her seventeen years. "Even if they stay neotenous they lose flexibility. And there's that long Paleolithic tradition of juvenile slavery. Inhuman, I call it."

"How old were you when it was safe to leave you around the house on your own?" challenges Monica.

"Five. That's when I had my first implants." Amber smiles at the approaching young Adonis, who smiles back: yes, it's Nicky, and he seems pleased to see her. *Life is good*, she thinks, idly considering whether or not to tell Pierre.

"Times change," remarks Monica. "Don't write your father off too soon; there might come a time when you want his company."

"Huh." Amber pulls a face at the old Borg component. "That's what you *all* say!"

As soon as Amber steps onto the grass, she can feel possibilities open up around her: she has management authority here, and this universe is *big*, wide open, not like Sadeq's existential trap. A twitch of a sub-process re-asserts her self-image, back to short hair and comfortable clothing. Another twitch brings up a whole load of useful diagnostics. Amber has an uncomfortable feeling that she's running in a compatibility box, here—there are signs that her access to the simulation system's control interface is very much via proxy—but at least she's got it.

"Wow. Back in the real world at last!" She can hardly contain her excitement, even forgetting to be pissed at Sadeq for thinking she was just an actor in his Cartesian theatre's performance of Puritan Hell. "Look! It's the DMZ!"

They're standing on a grassy knoll overlooking a gleaming Mediterranean city that snoozes beneath a Mandelbrot-fuzzy not-sun that hangs at the center of a hyperbolic landscape dwindling into the blue yonder, incomprehensibly distant. Circular baby-blue wells open in the walls of the world at regular intervals, connecting to other parts of the manifold. "How big is it, ghost? In planetary simulation-equivalents."

"This demilitarized zone is an embedded reality, funneling all transfers between the local star system's router and the civilization that built it. It uses on the order of a thousandth of the capacity of the Matrioshka brain it is part of, although the runaway excursion currently in force has absorbed most of that. Matrioshka brain, you are familiar with the concept?" The ghost sounds fussily pedantic.

Sadeq shakes his head. Amber glances at him, askance. "Take all the planets in a star system and dismantle them," she explains. "Turn them into dust—structured nanocomp, powered by heat exchangers, in concentric orbits around the central star. The inner orbitals run close to the melting point of iron; the outer ones are cold as liquid nitrogen, and each layer runs off the waste heat of the next shell in. It's like a Russian doll made out of Dyson spheres, shell enclosing shell enclosing shell, all run-

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ning uploads—Dad figured our own solar system could support, uh, about a hundred billion times as many inhabitants as Earth. At a conservative estimate. As uploads, living in simulation space."

"Ah." Sadeq nods thoughtfully. "Is that your definition, too?" he asks, glancing up at the glowing point the ghost uses to localize its presence.

"Substantially," it says, almost grudgingly.

"Substantially?" Amber glances around. *A billion worlds to explore*, she thinks dizzily. *And that's just the firewall?* She feels obscurely cheated: you need to be vaster than human just to count the digits in the big numbers at play here, but there's nothing fundamentally incomprehensible about it. This is the sort of civilization Dad said she could expect to live in, within her meatbody life-expectancy. Dad and his drinking buddies, singing "dismantle the Moon! Melt down Mars!" in a castle outside Prague as they waited for the results of a shamelessly gerrymandered election to come in in the third decade of the third millennium, the space and freedom party taking over the EU and cranking up to escape velocity. But this is supposed to be kiloparsecs from home, ancient alien civilizations and all that! Where's the exotic super-science? *I have a bad feeling about this,* she thinks, spawning a copy of herself to set up a private channel to Sadeq; *it isn't advanced enough. Do you suppose these guys could be like the Wunch? Parasites hitching a ride in the machine?*

The Wunch, a disastrous infection that had nearly taken over the *Field Circus*, are dumb parasitic aliens who infest the routers. Luckily, Earth's first uploads—who had reached the router years earlier and been assimilated by the Wunch—had been lobsters; the confused carpetbaggers succumbed to defenses jury-rigged by Pierre and the rest of the crew.

You believe it's lying to us? Sadeq sends back.

"Hmm." Amber sets off down-slope toward the piazza below, at the heart of the fake town. "It looks a bit too human to me."

"Human," echoes Sadeq, a curious wistfulness in his voice. "Did you not say humans are extinct?"

"Your species is obsolete," the ghost comments smugly. "Inappropriately adapted to artificial realities. Poorly optimized circuitry, excessively complex low-bandwidth sensors, messy global variables—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get the picture," says Amber, turning her attention on the town. "So why do you think *we* can deal with this alien god you've got a problem with?"

"It asked for you," said the ghost, narrowing from an ellipse to a line, and then shrinking to a dimensionless point of brilliance. "And now it's coming. We-I not willing to risk exposure. Call us-me when you have slain the dragon. Goodbye."

"Oh *shit*—" Amber spins round. But she and Sadeq are alone beneath the hot sunlight from above. The piazza, like the one in the Nursery republic, is charmingly rustic—but there's nobody home, nothing but ornate cast-iron furniture basking beneath the noon-bright sun, a table with a parasol over it, something furry lying sprawled in a patch of sunlight beside it.

"We appear to be alone for now," says Sadeq. He smiles crookedly, then nods at the table. "Maybe we should wait for our host to arrive?"

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"Our host." Amber peers around. "The ghost is kind of frightened of this alien. I wonder why?"

"It asked for *us*." Sadeq heads toward the table, pulls out a chair, and sits down carefully. "That could be very good news—or very bad."

"Hmm." Amber finishes her survey, sees no sign of life. For lack of any better idea, she ambles over to the table and sits down at the other side of it from Sadeq. He looks slightly nervous beneath her inspection, but maybe it's just embarrassment. *If I had an afterlife like that, I'd be embarrassed about it too,* Amber thinks to herself.

"Hey, you nearly tripped over—" Sadeq freezes, peering at something close to Amber's left foot. He looks puzzled. "What are *you* doing here?" he asks her blind spot.

"What are you talking to?" she asks, startled.

He's talking to me, dummy, says something tantalizingly familiar from her blind spot. *So the fuckwit's trying to use you to dislodge me, hmm? That's not exactly clever.*

"Who—" Amber squints at the flagstone, spawns a bunch of ghosts who tear hurriedly at her reality modification ackles. Nothing seems to shift the blindness. "Are you the alien?"

"What else could I be?" the blind spot asks with heavy irony. "No, I'm your father's pet cat. Listen, do you want to get out of here?"

"Uh." Amber rubs her eyes. "I can't see you, whatever you are," she says politely. "Do I know you?" She's got a strange sense that she *does* know the blind spot, that it's really important and she's missing something intimate to her own sense of identity, but what it might be she can't tell.

"Yeah, kid." There's a note of world-weary amusement in the not-voice coming from the hazy patch on the ground. "They've hacked you but good, both of you. Let me in and I'll fix it."

"No!" exclaims Amber, a second ahead of Sadeq, who looks at her oddly. "Are you really an invader?"

The blind spot sighs. "I'm as much an invader as *you* are, remember? I *came* here with you. Difference is, I'm not going to let some stupid corporate ghost use me as fungible currency."

"Fungible—" Sadeq stops. "I remember you," he says slowly, with an expression of absolute, utter surprise on his face. "What do you mean?"

The blind spot *yawns*, baring sharp ivory fangs. Amber shakes her head, dismissing the momentary hallucination. "Lemme guess. You woke up in a room and this alien ghost tells you the human species is extinct and asks you to do a number on me. Is that right?"

Amber nods, as an icy finger of fear trails up and down her spine. "Is it lying?" she asks.

"Damn right!" The blind spot is smiling, now, and the smile on the void won't go away—she can see the smile, just not the *body* it's attached to. "My reckoning is, we're about sixteen light years from Earth. The Wunch have been through here, stripped the dump, then took off for parts unknown; it's a trashhole, you wouldn't believe it. The main life form is an incredibly ornate corporate ecosphere, legal instruments breeding and replicating. They mug passing sapients and use them as currency."

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There's a triangular, pointy head behind the smile, slit eyes and sharp ears; predatory, intelligent-looking. Amber can see it out of the corners of her eyes when she looks around the piazza. "You mean we, uh, they grabbed us when we appeared and they've mangled my memories—" Amber suddenly finds it incredibly difficult to concentrate, but if she focuses on the smile she can almost see the body behind it, hunched like a furry chicken, tail wrapped neatly around its front paws.

"Yeah. Except that they didn't bargain on meeting something like *me*." The smile is infinitely wide, a Cheshire cat grin on the front of an orange and brown stripy body that shimmers in front of Amber's gaze like a hallucination. "Your mother's cracking tools are self-extending, Amber. Do you remember Hong Kong?"

"Hong—"

There is a moment of painless pressure, then Amber feels huge invisible barriers sliding away on all sides. She looks around, for the first time seeing the piazza as it really is, half the crew of the *Field Circus* waiting nervously around her, the grinning cat crouched on the floor at her feet, the enormous walls of recomplicating data that fence their little town off from the gaping holes—interfaces to the other routers in the network.

"Welcome back," Pierre says gravely, as Amber gives a squeak of surprise and leans forward to pick up her cat. "Now you're out from under, how about we start trying to figure out how to get home?"

Welcome to decade the sixth, millennium three. These old datelines don't mean so much any more, for while some billions of fleshbody humans are still infected with viral memes, the significance of theocentric dating has been dealt a body blow. This may be the fifties, but what that means to you depends on how fast your reality rate runs. The various upload clades exploding across the reaches of the solar system vary by several orders of magnitude—some are barely out of 2049, while others are exploring the subjective thousandth millennium.

While the *Field Circus* floats in orbit around an alien router—itself orbiting the brown dwarf Hyundai +4904/-56—while Amber and her crew are trapped on the far side of a wormhole linking the router to a network of incomprehensibly vast alien mindscapes—while all this is going on, the damnfool human species has finally succeeded in making itself obsolete. The proximate cause of its displacement from the pinnacle of creation (or the pinnacle of teleological self-congratulation, depending on your stance on evolutionary biology) is an attack of self-aware corporations. The phrase "smart money" has taken on a whole new meaning, for the collision between international business law and neurocomputing technology has given rise to a whole new family of species—fast-moving corporate carnivores in the net. The planet Mercury has been broken up by a consortium of energy brokers, and Venus is an expanding debris cloud, energized to a violent glare by the trapped and channeled solar output; a million billion fist-sized computing caltrops, backsides glowing dull red with the efflux from their thinking, orbit the sun at various inclinations no further out than Mercury used to be.

Billions of fleshbody humans refuse to have anything to do with the

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blasphemous new realities. Many of their leaders denounce the uploads and AIs as soulless machines. Many more are timid, harboring self-preservation memes that amplify a previously healthy aversion to having one's brain peeled like an onion by mind-mapping robots into an all-pervading neurosis—sales of electrified tinfoil-lined hats are at an all-time high. Still, hundreds of millions have already traded their meat puppets for mind machines: and they breed fast. In another few years, the flesh-body populace will be an absolute minority of the posthuman clade. Some time later, there will probably be a war: the dwellers in the thoughtcloud are hungry for dumb matter to convert, and the fleshbodies make notoriously poor use of the collection of silicon and rare elements that pool at the bottom of their gravity well.

Energy and thought are driving a phase change in the condensed matter substance of the solar system. The MIPS per kilogram metric is on the steep upward leg of a sigmoidal curve—dumb matter is coming to life as the mind children restructure everything with voracious nanomechanical servants. The thoughtcloud forming in orbit around the sun will ultimately mark the graveyard of a biological ecology, another marker in space visible to the telescopes of any new iron-age species with the insight to understand what they're seeing: the death throes of dumb matter, the birth of a habitable reality vaster than a galaxy and far speedier. Death throes that within a few centuries will mean the extinction of biological life within a light-year or so of that star—for the majestic Matrioshka brains, though they are the pinnacles of sentient civilization, are innately hostile to fleshy life.

Pierre, Donna-the-all-seeing-eye, and Su Ang fill Amber in on what they've discovered about the bazaar—as they call the space the ghost referred to as the demilitarized zone—over ice-cold margaritas and a very good simulation of a sociable joint.

"It's half a light-hour in diameter, four hundred times as massive as Earth," Pierre explains. "Not *solid,* of course—the largest component is about the size my fist used to be." Amber squints, trying to remember how big that was—scale factors are hard to remember accurately. "I met this old chatbot that said it's outlived its original star, but I'm not sure it's running with a full deck. Anyway, if it's telling the truth, we're a third of a light-year out from a closely coupled binary system—they use orbital lasers the size of Jupiter to power it without getting too close to all those icky gravity wells."

Amber is intimidated, despite her better judgment, because the bazaar is several orders of magnitude more complex than the totality of human pre-singularity civilization. She tries not to show it in front of the others, but she's worried that getting home may be impossible—requiring enterprise beyond the economic event horizon, as realistic a proposition as a dime debuting as a dollar bill. Still, she's got to at least try. Just knowing about the existence of the bazaar will change so many things—

"How much money can we lay our hands on?" she asks. "What *is* money hereabouts, anyway? Assuming they've got a scarcity-mediated economy. Bandwidth, maybe?"

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"Ah, well." Pierre looks at her oddly. "That's the problem. Didn't the ghost tell you?"

"Tell me?" Amber raises an eyebrow. "Yeah, but it hasn't exactly proven to be a reliable guide to anything, has it?"

"Tell her," Su Ang says quietly. She looks away, embarrassed by something.

"They've got a scarcity economy all right," says Pierre. "Bandwidth is the limited resource and things that come from other cognitive universes are, well, currency. We came in through the coin slot, is it any wonder we ended up in the bank?"

"That's so deeply wrong that I don't know where to begin," Amber grumbles. "How did they get into this mess?"

"Don't ask me." Pierre shrugs. "I have the distinct feeling that anyone or anything we meet in this place won't have any more of a clue than we do—whoever or whatever built this brain, there ain't nobody home any more except for the self-propelled corporations and hitchhikers like the Wunch. We're in the dark, just like they were."

"Huh." Amber focuses on the table in front of her, rests the heel of her palm on the cool metal, and tries to remember how to fork a second copy of her state vector. A moment later her ghost obligingly fucks with the physics model of the table; iron gives way like rubber beneath her fingertips, a pleasant elasticity. "Okay, we have some control over the universe, at least that's something to work with. Tried any self-modification?"

"That's dangerous," Pierre says emphatically. "The more of us the better before we start doing *that* stuff. And we need some firewalling of our own."

"How deep does reality go, here?" asks Sadeq. It's almost the first question he's asked of his own volition, and Amber takes it as a positive sign that he's finally coming out of his shell.

"Oh, the Planck length is about a hundredth of a millimeter here. Too small to see, comfortably large for the simulation engines to handle. Not like *real* spacetime."

"Well, then." Sadeq pauses. "They can zoom their reality if they need to?"

"Yeah, fractals work in here." Pierre nods. "I didn't—"

"This place is a trap," Su Ang says emphatically.

"No, it isn't," Pierre replies, nettled.

"What do you mean, a trap?" asks Amber.

"We've been here a while," says Ang. She glances at Aineko, who sprawls on the flagstones, snoozing or whatever it is that weakly superhuman AIs do when they're emulating a sleeping cat. "After your cat broke us out of bondage, we had a look around. There are things here that—" she shivers. "Humans can't survive in most of the simulation spaces here. We're talking universes with physics models that don't support our kind of neural computing. You could migrate there, but you'd need to be ported to a whole new type of logic—by the time you did that, would you still be *you?* Still, there are enough entities roughly as complex as we are to prove that the builders aren't here any more. Just lesser sapients, rooting through the wreckage. Worms and parasites squirming through the body after nightfall on the battlefield."

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"So there's no hope of making contact," Amber summarizes. "At least, not with anything transcendent and well-inclined."

"That's right," Pierre concedes. He doesn't sound happy about it.

"And we're stuck in a pocket universe with limited bandwidth to home and a bunch of crazy slum-dwellers who want to use us for currency. 'Jesus saves, and redeems souls for valuable gifts.' Yeah?"

"Yeah." Su Ang looks gloomy.

"Well." Amber glances at Sadeq speculatively. Sadeq is staring into the distance, at the crazy infinite sun spot that limns the square with shadows. "Hey, god-man. Got a question for you."

"Yes?" Sadeq looks at her, a slightly dazed expression on his face. "I'm sorry, I am just feeling the jaws of a larger trap around my throat—"

"Don't be." Amber grins, and it is not a pleasant expression. "Have you ever been to Brooklyn?"

"No, why—"

"You're going to help me sell these lying bastards a bridge. Okay? And when we've sold it, we're going to get the buyer to drive us across, so we can go home. Listen, here's how we're going to do it. . . ."

"I can do this, I think," Sadeq says, moodily examining the Klein bottle on the table. The bottle is half-empty, its fluid contents invisible around the corner of the fourth dimensional store. "I spent long enough alone in there to—" he shivers.

"I don't want you damaging yourself," Amber says, calmly enough, because she has an ominous feeling that their survival in this place has an expiration date attached.

"Oh, never fear." Sadeq grins lopsidedly. "One pocket hell is much like another."

"Do you understand why—"

"Yes, yes," he says dismissively. "We can't send copies of ourselves into it, that would be an abomination. It needs to be unpopulated, yes?"

"Well. The idea is to get us home, not leave thousands of copies of ourselves trapped in a pocket universe here. Isn't that it?" Su Ang asks hesitantly. She's looking distracted, most of her attention focused on absorbing the experiences of a dozen ghosts she's spun off to attend to perimeter security.

"Who are we selling this *to?*" asks Sadeq. "If you want me to make it attractive—"

"It doesn't need to be a complete replica of the Earth. It just has to be a convincing advertisement for a pre-singularity civilization full of humans. You've got two-and-seventy zombies to dissect for their brains; bolt together a bunch of variables you can apply to them and you can permutate them to look a bit more varied."

Amber turns her attention to the snoozing cat. "Hey, furball. How long have we been here really, in real-time? Can you grab Sadeq some more resources for his personal paradise garden?"

Aineko stretches and yawns, totally feline, then looks up at Amber with narrowed eyes and raised tail. " 'Bout eighteen minutes, wall-clock time." The cat stretches again and sits, front paws drawn together primly, tail

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curled around them. "The ghosts are pushing. You know? I don't think I can sustain this for too much longer. They're not good at hacking you, but I think it won't be too long before they instantiate a new copy of you, one that'll be predisposed to their side."

"I don't get why they didn't assimilate you along with the rest of us."

"Blame your mother again—she's the one who kept updating the digital rights management code on my personality. 'Illegal consciousness is copyright theft' sucks until an alien tries to rewire your hindbrain with a debugger; then it's a life-saver." Aineko glances down and begins washing one paw. "I can give your mullah-man about six days, subjective time. After that, all bets are off."

"I will take it, then." Sadeq stands. "Thank you." He smiles at the cat; a smile that fades to translucency, hanging in the simulated air like an echo as the priest returns to his tower—this time with a blueprint and a plan in mind.

"That leaves just us." Su Ang glances at Pierre, back to Amber. "Who are you going to sell this crazy scheme to?"

Amber leans back and smiles. Behind her, Donna—her avatar an archaic movie camera suspended below a model helicopter—is filming everything for posterity. "Who do we know who's dumb enough to buy into a scam like this?"

Pierre looks at her suspiciously. "I think we've been here before," he says slowly. "You aren't going to make me kill anyone, are you?"

"I don't think that'll be necessary, unless the corporate ghosts think we're going to get away from them and are greedy enough to want to kill us."

"You see, she learned from last time," Ang comments, and Amber nods. "No more misunderstandings. Right?" She beams at Amber.

Amber beams right back. "Right. And that's why *you*—" she points at Pierre—"are going to go find out if any relics of the Wunch are hanging about here. I want you to make them an offer they won't refuse."

"How much for just the civilization?" asks the slug.

Pierre looks down at it thoughtfully. It's not really a terrestrial mollusk; slugs on earth aren't two meters long and don't have lacy white exoskeletons to hold their chocolate-colored flesh in shape. But then, it isn't really the alien it appears to be, either; it's a defaulting corporate instrument that has disguised itself as a long-extinct alien upload, in the hope that its creditors won't recognize it if it looks like a randomly evolved sentient.

"The civilization isn't for sale," Pierre says slowly. The translation interface shimmers, storing up his words and transforming them into a different deep grammar: not merely translating his syntax, but mapping equivalent meanings where necessary. "But we can give you privileged observer status if that's what you want. And we know what you are. If you're interested in finding a new exchange to be traded on, your existing intellectual property assets will be worth rather more there than here."

The rogue corporation rears up slightly and bunches into a fatter lump; its skin blushes red in patches. "Must think about this. Is your mandatory accounting time-cycle fixed or variable term? Are self-owned corporate entities able to enter contracts?"

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"I could ask my patron," Pierre says casually. Suppressing a stab of angst; he's still not sure where he and Amber stand, but theirs is far more than just a business relationship and he worries about the risks she's taking. "My patron has a jurisdiction within which she can modify corporate law to accommodate your requirements. Your activities on a wider scale might require shell companies, but that can be taken care of."

The translation membrane wibbles for a while, apparently reformulating some difficult concepts in a manner that the corporation can absorb. Pierre is reasonably confident that it'll work, however. He waits patiently, looking around at the swampy landscape, mud flats punctuated by clumps of spiky violet ferns. The corporation has to be desperate, to be considering the bizarre proposition that Amber has dreamed up for him to pitch to it.

"Sounds interesting," the slug declares after a brief confirmatory debate with the membrane. "If I supply the genome, can you customize a container for it?"

"I believe so," Pierre says carefully. "For your part, can you deliver the energy we need?"

"From a gate?" For a moment the translation membrane hallucinates a stick-human, shrugging. "Easy. Gates are all entangled: dump coherent radiation in at one, get it out at another."

"But the lightspeed lag—"

"No problem. You go first, then a dumb instrument I leave behind buys up power and sends it after. Router network is synchronous, within framework of state machines that run Universe 1.0; messages propagate at same speed, speed of light in vacuum. Whole point of the network is that it is non-lossy. Who would trust their mind to a communications channel that might partially randomize them in transit?"

Pierre goes cross-eyed, trying to understand the implications of the slug's cosmology. But there isn't really time, here and now: they've got on the order of a minute of wall-clock time to get everything together, if Aineko is right, before the angry ghosts that resurrected Amber to do their bidding start trying to break into the DMZ by other means. "If you are willing to try this, we'd be happy to accommodate you," he says, thinking of crossed fingers and rabbits' feet and firewalls.

"It's a deal," the membrane translates the slug's response back at him. "Now we exchange shares/plasmids/ownership? Then merger complete?"

Pierre stares at the slug: "But this is a business arrangement!" he protests. "What's sex got to do with it?"

"Apologies offered. I am thinking we have a translation error. You said this was to be a merging of businesses?"

"Not *that* way. It's a contract. We agree to take you with us. In return, you help lure the Wunch into the domain we're setting up for them. . . ."

And so on.

Steeling herself, Amber recalls the address the ghost gave her for Sadeq's afterlife universe. In her own subjective time, it's been about half an hour since he left. "Coming?" she asks her cat.

"Don't think I will," says Aineko. It looks away, blissfully unconcerned.

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"Bah." Amber tenses, then opens the port to Sadeq's pocket universe.

As before, she finds herself indoors, standing on an ornate mosaic floor in a room with whitewashed walls and peaked windows. But there's something different about it, and, after a moment, she realizes what it is. The sound of vehicle traffic from outside, the cooing of pigeons on the rooftops, someone shouting across the street: there are people here.

She walks over to the nearest window and looks out, then recoils. It's *hot* outside. Dust and fumes hang in air the color of cement over rough-finished concrete apartment buildings, their roofs covered in satellite uplinks and cheap, garish LED advertising panels. Looking down, she sees motor scooters, cars—filthy fossil-fuelled behemoths, a ton of steel and explosives in motion to carry only one human, a mass ratio worse than an archaic ICBM—brightly dressed people walking to and fro. A news helicam buzzes overhead, lenses darting and glinting at the traffic.

"Just like home, isn't it?" says Sadeq, behind her.

Amber starts. "This is where you grew up? This is Yazd?"

"It doesn't exist any more, in realspace." Sadeq looks thoughtful, but far more animated than the barely conscious parody of himself that she'd rescued from this building—back when it was a mediaeval vision of the afterlife—scant subjective hours ago. He cracks a smile: "Probably a good thing. They were dismantling it even while we were preparing to leave, you know?"

"It's detailed." Amber throws her gaze out through the window, multiplexes it, sends little virtual viewpoints dancing through the streets of the Iranian industrial 'burb. Overhead, big Airbuses ply the skyways, bearing pilgrims on the Hajj, tourists to the coastal resorts on the Persian Gulf, produce to the foreign markets.

"It's the best time I could recall," Sadeq says. "I didn't spend much time here—I was in Qom, studying, and Kazakhstan, for cosmonaut training—but it's meant to be the early twenties. After the troubles, after the fall of the guardians; a young, energetic, liberal country full of optimism and faith in democracy. Values that weren't doing well elsewhere."

"I thought democracy was a new thing there?"

"No." Sadeq shakes his head. "There were pro-democracy riots in Tehran in the nineteenth century, did you know that? That's why the first revolution—no." He makes a cutting gesture. "Politics I can live without." He frowns. "But look. Is this what you wanted?"

Amber recalls her scattered eyes—some of which have flown as much as a thousand kilometers from her locus—and concentrates on reintegrating: memories of Sadeq's re-creation. "It looks convincing. But not too convincing."

"That was the idea."

"Well, then." She smiles. "Is it just Iran? Or did you take any liberties around the edges?"

"Who, me?" He raises an eyebrow. "I have enough doubts about the morality of this—project—without trying to trespass on Allah's territory, peace be unto him. I promise you, there are no sapients in this world but us; the people are the hollow shells of my dreaming, storefront dummies. The animals are crude bitmaps. This is what you asked for, and no more."

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"Well, then." Amber pauses. Recalls the expression on the dirt-smudged face of a little boy, bouncing a ball at his companions by the boarded-up front of a gas station on a desert road. Remembers the animated chatter of two synthetic housewives, one in traditional black and the other in some imported Eurotrash fashion. "Are you sure they aren't real?" she asks.

"Quite sure." But for a moment, she sees Sadeq looking uncertain. "Shall we go? Do you have the occupiers ready to move in yet?"

"Yes to the first, and Pierre's working on the second. Come on, we don't want to get trampled by the squatters." She waves and opens a door back onto the piazza, where her robot cat—the alien's nightmare intruder in the DMZ—sleeps, chasing superintelligent dream mice through multidimensional realities. "Sometimes I wonder if *I'm* conscious. Thinking these thoughts gives me the creeps; let's go and sell a bridge."

Amber confronts the mendacious ghost in the windowless room stolen from *2001*.

"You have confined the monster," the ghost states.

"Yes." Amber waits for a subjective moment, feeling delicate fronds tickle at the edges of her awareness in what seems to be a timing-channel attack. She feels a momentary urge to sneeze, a hot flash of anger that passes almost immediately.

"And you have modified yourself to lock out external control," the ghost adds. "What is it that you want, Autonome Amber?"

"Don't you have any concept of individuality?" she asks, annoyed by its presumption at meddling with her internal states.

"Individuality is an unnecessary barrier to information transfer," says the ghost, morphing into its original form, a translucent reflection of her own body. "A large block of the DMZ is still inaccessible to we-me. Are you *sure* you have defeated the monster?"

"It'll do as I say," Amber replies, forcing herself to sound more confident than she feels—that damned transhuman cyborg cat is no more predictable than any real feline. "Now, the matter of payment arises."

"*Payment*." The ghost sounds amused. But now Pierre's filled her in on what to look for, Amber can see the translation membranes around it. Their color shift maps to a huge semantic distance; the creature on the other side, even though it looks like a ghost-image of herself, is very far from human. "How can we-us be expected to pay our own money for rendering services to us?"

Amber smiles. "We want an open channel back to the router we arrived through."

"Impossible," says the ghost.

"We want an open channel, *and* for it to stay open for six hundred million seconds after we clear it."

"Impossible," the ghost repeats.

"We can trade you a whole civilization," Amber says blandly. "A whole human nation, millions of individuals. Just let us go and we'll see to it."

"You—please wait." The ghost shimmers slightly, fuzzing at the edges.

Amber opens a private channel to Pierre while the ghost confers with its other nodes. *Are the Wunch in place yet?* she sends.

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They're moving in. This bunch don't remember what happened on the Field Circus, *memories of those events never made it back to them. So the slug's got them to cooperate. It's kinda scary to watch—like the Invasion of the Body Snatchers, you know?*

I don't care if it's scary to watch, Amber replies, *I need to know if we're ready yet.*

Sadeq says yes, the universe is ready.

Right, pack yourself down. We'll be moving soon.

The ghost is firming up in front of her. "A whole civilization?" it asks. "That is not possible. Your arrival—" It pauses, fuzzing a little. *Hah, Gotcha!* thinks Amber. *Liar, liar, pants on fire!* "You cannot possibly have found a human civilization in the archives."

"The monster you complain about that came through with us is a predator," she asserts blandly. "It swallowed an entire nation before we heroically attracted its attention and induced it to follow us into the router. It's an archivore—everything was *inside* it, still frozen until we expanded it again. This civilization will have been restored from hot shadows in our own solar system, already: there is nothing to gain by taking it home with us. But we need to return to ensure that no more predators of this type discover the router—or the high bandwidth hub we linked to it."

"You are sure you have killed this monster?" asks the ghost. "It would be inconvenient if it were to emerge from hiding in its digest archives."

"I can guarantee it won't trouble you again if you let us go," says Amber, mentally crossing her fingers. The ghost doesn't seem to have noticed the huge wedge of fractally compressed data that bloats her personal scope by an order of magnitude. She can still feel Aineko's goodbye smile inside her head, an echo of ivory teeth trusting her to revive it if the escape plan succeeds.

"We-us agree." The ghost twists weirdly, morphs into a five-dimensional hypersphere. It bubbles violently for a moment, then spits out a smaller token—a warped distortion in the air, like a gravityless black hole. "Here is your passage. Show us the civilization."

"Okay—" *Now!* "—catch." Amber twitches an imaginary muscle and one wall of the room dissolves, forming a doorway into Sadeq's existential hell, now redecorated as a fair facsimile of a twenty-first century industrial city in Iran, and populated by a Wunch of parasites who can't believe what they've lucked into—an entire continent of zombies waiting to host their flesh-hungry consciousness.

The ghost drifts toward the open window; Amber grabs the hole and yanks it open, gets a grip on her own thoughts, and sends *open wide!* on the channel everybody is listening in on. For a moment time stands still; and then—

A synthetic gemstone the size of a Coke can falls through the cold vacuum, in high orbit around a brown dwarf. But the vacuum is anything but dark. A sapphire glare as bright as the noonday sun on Mars shines on the crazy diamond, billowing and cascading off sails as fine as soap bubbles that slowly drift and tense away from the can. The runaway slug-corporation's proxy is holding the router open, and the lump of strange

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matter is shining with the brilliance of a nuclear fireball, laser light channeled from a star eight light years away to power the *Field Circus* on its return trip to the once-human solar system.

Amber has retreated, with Pierre, into a simulation of her home aboard the Ring Imperium. One wall of her bedroom is a solid slab of diamond, looking out across the boiling Jovian ionosphere from an orbit low enough to make the horizon appear flat. They're curled together in her bed, a slightly more comfortable copy of the royal bed of King Henry VIII of England, a bed that appears to be carved from thousand year old oak beams. As with everything else about the Ring Imperium, appearances are deceptive: and even more so in the cramped simulation spaces of the *Field Circus* as it slowly accelerates toward a tenth of lightspeed.

"Let me get this straight. You convinced. The locals. That a simulation of Iran populated by refugee members of the Wunch. Was a human civilization?"

"Yeah." Amber stretches lazily and smirks at him. "It's *their* damn fault; if the corporate collective entities didn't use conscious viewpoints as money, they wouldn't have fallen for a trick like that, would they?"

"People. Money."

"Well." She yawns, then sits up and snaps her finger imperiously: down-stuffed pillows appear behind her back, and a silver salver bearing two full glasses of wine materializes between them. "Corporations are life forms back home, too, aren't they? We give our AIs corporations to make them legal entities, but it goes further. Look at any company headquarters, fitted out with works of art and expensive furniture and with staff bowing-and-scraping everywhere—"

"—The new aristocracy. Right?"

"Wrong. When they take over, what you get is more like the new biosphere. Hell, the new primordial soup: prokaryotes, bacteria and algae, mindlessly swarming, trading money for plasmids." The queen passes her consort a wine glass. He drinks from it: it refills miraculously. "You've got to wonder where the builders of that structure *came* from. And where they *went*."

"Maybe the companies spent them." Pierre looks worried. "Running up a national debt, importing luxurious viewpoint extensions, munching exotic dreams. Once they plugged into the net, a primitive Matrioshka civilization would be like, um." He pauses. "Tribal. A primitive post-singularity civilization meeting the galactic net for the first time. Over-awed. Wanting all the luxuries. Spending their capital, their human—or alien—capital, the meme machines that built them. Until there's nothing left but a howling wilderness of corporate mechanisms looking for someone to own."

"Speculation."

"Idle speculation," he agrees.

"But we can't ignore it." She nods. "Is the hitch hiker happy?"

"Last time I checked on him, yeah." Pierre blows on his wine glass and it dissolves into a million splinters of light, but he looks dubious at the mention of the slug-shaped corporate instrument they're taking with them in return for help engineering their escape. "Don't trust him out in

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the unrestricted sim-spaces yet. Aineko is spending a lot of time with him."

"So that's where she is!"

"Cats never come when you call them, do they?"

"There's that," she agrees. Then with a worried glance at the vision of Jupiter's cloudscape: "I wonder what we'll find when we get there?"

Outside the window, the imaginary Jovian terminator is sweeping toward them with eerie rapidity, sucking them toward an uncertain nightfall. ○

EIGHT THINGS NOT TO DO WHEN THE ALIEN STEPS OUT OF ITS SAUCER

Reach for something in your pocket.

Ask about Elvis.

Give it the Vulcan live-long-and-prosper sign.

Tell it about Scientology.

Offer it some shiny beads in exchange for its ship.

Make a lewd gesture and point
and laugh about how funny it looks.

Ask if it has any fruits to declare.

Take it to your leader.

–Bruce Boston

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THE MADNESS OF CROWDS

Paul McAuley

Paul McAuley's latest novel is *Whole Wide World*. His next book, *White Devils*, will be published in 2004.

To answer some of your questions:
Yes, I really am Bill McAbe's older, not-so-smart, and much-less-famous brother;
No, I don't know where Bill is, but I'm certain that he didn't plant the bomb that blew up his apartment and killed his assistant, and I do think he's still alive: sue me if you think I'm prejudiced;

Yes, I do know why he disappeared. He told me everything, and toward the end I was part of it.

How do you know that I'm who I say I am? How do you know if what I'm going to tell you is true? Be patient, friend. I'll get to that.

As far as I'm concerned, it began three weeks ago, when I got back from a disappointing dinner party (at which a very good friend of mine tried to match me with someone totally unsuitable), to find my answer phone blinking. It was the manager of this club that I happen to know. He said that he had someone in his office who claimed to be my brother. One of the security guys had found him prowling around on the roof, and would I like to come down and sort it out or would I prefer he called the cops?

I went right over, and it was lucky for Bill that this guy, Stavros, a three hundred pound Greek sweetheart, happened to owe me a favor after I had designed the club's wet room at cost price. I got Bill out of there after only a half hour of kissing ass, making all kinds of promises that it would never happen again. I even got Bill's stuff back, although the security guy had stomped on it pretty thoroughly, thinking it was some kind of recording equipment; the club, a *very* discreet consensual sex place, was highly sensitive about that kind of thing. Well, it was recording equipment of a kind, although it wasn't a video camera or a tape recorder. Bill hugged the bag to his chest all through the ride downtown to his loft apartment in Tribeca, for once in his life clamming up—you know Bill, you *know* how unusual that is—and refusing to tell me what he had been doing up there

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on the roof, fussing with his bleeding nose and saying that maybe he'd let me know in a couple of days, providing the Samoan asshole who'd kicked his stuff up and down the stairs hadn't compromised the samples.

I didn't push it. I was tired, I had a headache from too much wine and Stavros's cigar smoke. I even forgot about Bill's promise, until I got a call three days later.

Bill and I both lived in New York City, and we saw each other once a month for a pizza pie lunch at Hot John's, in the Village, where Bill would suck me dry of gossip about the romantic world of TV drama production, and speculate a little too loudly about which of the off-duty firefighters, cops and other municipal workers who hung out in the restaurant would make a good boyfriend for me. Yes, you know how Bill was. Like a Tourette's sufferer, he couldn't keep his thoughts to himself. He had no inner monologue, no censor, and he also had a filthy mind and a pretty childish sense of humor. In many ways, he had never really grown up—you only had to look at his apartment, the laboratory at one end full of all kinds of scientist's toys, the living room at the other full of all kinds of boy's toys. He had a bad, bad jones for gadgets, robots, and sci-fi props. He had the world's biggest lava lamp. I believe he was one of the first to buy one of those silly-looking dumbbell/pogo stick people-movers.

This time, though, he was all business, and we didn't meet in Hot John's, but in a coffee shop over in the East Village, a perfect little time-capsule of 1950's futurism, with streamlined chrome trim on its counter and stools, and china decorated with black-and-white starscapes and rocketships.

He said, "You want to guess what I was doing on that roof? You can have three chances. Get it right, I'll pick up the check."

I said that I'd rather pay, to save time and to make sure that we got out of there alive—Bill is the stingiest tipper I've ever encountered.

"I was collecting pheromones," he said, favoring me with one of his chipmunk grins. He never would wear his braces when he was a kid, and, as a result, he had an overbite that would cost tens of thousands of dollars to fix. Not that he didn't have the money of course, from the two dozen patents on his Spin Resonance Chromatograph and those other techy gadgets he invented; it just never occurred to him to spend money on something as mundane as dentistry.

Now you know what pheromones are, of course, but I had to suffer one of Bill's little Dick-and-Jane lectures about how chemicals released into the air in absolutely minute quantities could affect our behavior; I had to watch his eyes roll when I essayed that they were like perfumes; I had to listen to his condescending and perfectly tedious explanation that we are very sensitive, at an unconscious level, to subtle variations in body odor, that the mix of complicated organic chemicals in our sweat is determined by the make-up of our immune systems, that it had been experimentally proven that girls prefer men who smell like their fathers ("Of course, *you'd* probably prefer men who smell like our mother," he couldn't help adding) because that means they have compatible immune systems and so will produce better children. I'm sure I've gotten some of this wrong, but you get the drift.

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I asked him what this had to do with his little roof-top escapade.

"I told you. I was collecting pheromones. It's my new field. I'm getting some very useful results. You'll be interested to know, for instance, that the samples I collected from the air vent of that club prove that men like you are just like men like me."

"How alarming."

"Pheromonally speaking. You produce the same inducers as heteros."

I made the mistake of asking what inducers were, and was rewarded with another insufferable lecturette on the effect of pheromones on the parasympathetic nervous system, on brain chemistry, and on human behavior.

"As we smell," I said, "so shall we reap."

"Not bad," Bill said. He made a big deal about noting it down in his PalmTop, and said, ever so casually, "What are you doing next week, by the way?"

He knew of course. I was resting. The production company that made *City Girls* was in negotiation with NBC for a third season, so everyone, including their set designer (*c'est moi*), was on a break.

"How would you like," Bill said, "to go to Las Vegas? Top hotel, all expenses paid. Say yes, I'll even pay for this coffee."

I thought that Las Vegas in February sounded pretty nice, even with Bill attached to the package. I thought, what's the harm.

Really, how dumb can you *get?*

Because there was, of course, a catch. And, of course, Bill didn't tell me about it until we were there. After I'd told him, at length, how much I hated boxing, he shrugged and said, "All you have to do is sit there, two or three hours, the equipment in the bag on your lap. It's just a pump that flushes large volumes of air through activated charcoal filters. I take the filters, bake off the organics, run them through the old SRC."

"And you can't do it because—"

"Because you know how much I hate crowds."

I couldn't argue with that. He'd always taken taxis, never the subway or the bus, even when he was a poor-as-a-church-mouse postgraduate student. It wasn't claustrophobia, and it wasn't that he hated people. It was just that large numbers of them in a small space freaked him out. That was why he got so interested in the whole pheromone thing, of course, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Well, the fight didn't take three hours, or even two. I reeled out, my ears singing with the after-effects of the atrocious rock music they pumped at full volume to get the crowd going, and Bill wasn't waiting where he had said he would be waiting, and he wasn't answering his cell phone either.

Where he was, I learned, a couple of hours after I got back to our hotel, was in jail, for attempted assault on one of the contestants.

He was out the next day. He bailed himself for a cool hundred thousand, was full of his little adventure. While I was being battered by hard rock in the audience, he stood in the little crowd of autograph hunters outside the arena's freight entrance, waiting for one of the boxers to arrive. Somehow, he got past the man's handlers, and now he was looking at ten years for assault. With a Q-tip.

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"I wanted a sweat sample," he said, utterly unrepentant. "I have a theory about boxers—about people who like to fight."

"You could have gone to a gym."

"The guy is the heavyweight champion of the world. He's the alpha male's alpha male."

"He *was* the world champion," I said. "He lost in the first round. You'll be lucky if he doesn't sue you."

"At least you got the sample."

"My ears are still ringing. And I don't think I'll ever get the stink of cigar smoke out of this suit. Which is a Paul Smith, by the way, imported from London, England. Not that that will mean anything to you. The least you can do is tell me what all this is about."

"I promise. Once I'm certain."

I know. Not at all like the run-off-the-mouth Bill we all know. He was very serious about this thing of his.

We flew back, Bill in First Class, me in Business (using my bicoastal air miles to upgrade the steerage ticket he'd bought me), and I didn't see him for two weeks, although he kept sending me faxes of newspaper stories. A massacre of Muslims by Hindus in India. A mob in England that burned alive an old man incorrectly suspected of pedophilia; after they set fire to his house, they drove back firefighters and police with stones and gasoline bombs. A baying mob of Protestants outside a Catholic school in Northern Ireland . . . all kinds of human brutishness. Do you get the idea yet? No, nor did I, until Bill Explained All.

This time it was in a scruffy riverside park in lovely post-industrial north Brooklyn. I took the "L." Bill took a taxi. He looked terrible: red-rimmed eyes, a bum's stubble, greasy hair, a haunted expression, the jitters. We clutched cardboard cups of coffee and shivered in the breeze off the East River, and he told me what he had been researching, and what he had found.

He had collected samples from venues where aggression was literally in the air—every place from rush hour subway stations to my boxing match—and used his Spin Resonance Chromatograph to isolate and characterize a particular human pheromone. He told me that it acted like a highly specific shot of alcohol. It released inhibitions, made people reckless, and heightened their tendency to behave violently. Not only that, but when you breathed in a dose, your body started manufacturing and releasing it too: it spread like a cold, a contagious madness that could turn any crowd into a blood-hungry mob that would attack anyone who stood out—anyone who didn't belong, anyone who was that little bit different.

"I found a version in chimpanzees, too," Bill said. "Specifically, in sexually active juvenile males who are subordinate to the alpha male. In the wild, young male chimps can be like teenage gangbangers. They rape any female chimp they come across, murder her baby if she has one, form gangs to go hunting monkeys. . . . We're just like chimps, which is hardly surprising, because we share a common ancestor with them. So do gorillas, but gorillas live in family groups of females and their children and a single alpha male, and alpha males are less sensitive to the releaser. Al-

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pha males, they're cool, they don't need to gang up with other males to show what they're made of."

"That's why you wanted to test the boxer."

"I had a better idea. Took a few meetings with CEOs of pharmaceutical companies; they're alpha males too. I spun them some bullshit, wore a fabric Band-Aid on one of my fingers so I could get a sweat sample when I shook hands. I found that CEO sweat is almost completely free of releaser, while the sweat of most of their subordinates contains low to medium levels. You ever notice how *calm* it seems, up in the executive suites? It's not just because of the thicker carpets and the better lighting. It's also because of the air chemistry."

There was more. Some people were highly sensitive to the releaser, but couldn't make it themselves—Bill was one of them, a wimp and proud of it. And Bill had broken down the releaser's structure and synthesized an antidote to it: an antagonist that inhibited the releaser's action on the human nervous system.

"The thing is," Bill said, tossing his half-empty coffee cup toward the river, "someone else has made it too."

He'd been taking control samples in what he believed would be neutral spaces—libraries, museums, a shopping mall. And he'd found the signature of the antagonist in the air of the shopping mall.

"Not as good as mine, but it does the job. Have you ever wondered why people zone out in shopping malls, in train stations, airports? Well, now you know. It's because someone is messing with your mind."

I said that it all sounded very *X-Files*.

"You don't believe me? Well, the reason we met here is that I've been followed, the last week. Everywhere I go. Don't worry, I'm pretty sure the taxi driver shook them off before we left Manhattan. I've always wanted," he said, "to tell a taxi driver to lose the guy on my tail."

"Who's following you? How do they know that you know?"

I didn't have to ask how they knew that Bill knew. Once he had amassed enough data, he'd gone online, boasting to his colleagues, stirring things up in science newsgroups.

"The antagonist makes people less prone to violence," he said, "but it makes them docile too—suggestible, sheeplike. Completely lacking anger is as bad as having nothing but." He looked around for perhaps the fiftieth time in the ten minutes we'd spent together. He said that he had to go.

I wasn't one hundred percent convinced, but I told him to be careful.

"Look after this," he said, and handed me a padded envelope and walked away.

That was the last time I saw him. The next day, his apartment and the apartments above and below it were wrecked by the crude but powerful bomb that also killed his research assistant. I don't think that was Bill, covering his tracks. If he ever made a bomb, it would be more carefully constructed than any of the Unabomber's. No, I think he stumbled onto something someone doesn't want us to know about.

By now, I have no doubt that you're wondering how you can ever believe this preposterous story.

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Well, for one thing, you're on the list that Bill gave me; you're an expert in the use of Bill's Spin Resonance Chromatography system. Go into any large shopping mall, take an air sample, and look for the signature of the organic molecule that's given in the attachment to this message. And don't try and trace this email—I sent it through an anonymous remailer, and I like to think that I've made myself pretty hard to find.

There was a big wad of cash in that padded envelope, enough to allow me to travel in style for quite some time, and there was something else.

Two little sealed glass vials, the kind you used to get poppers in, if you've ever done that scene. Each half-full of a colorless, oily liquid. One is the releaser. The other is the antagonist. One pure madness, the other a million-fold dose of universal peace—or the worst weapon of a brain-washing despotism.

So please. Look for that signature. Satisfy yourself that I'm telling you the truth. Think very carefully, and then go to the biochem.net newsgroup and post an answer to this question: should I destroy Bill's gift, or, like poor wretched Pandora, should I give it to the world? O

Chat online
with your favorite authors!

Dreamer of Dune **March 11 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Brian Herbert on his biography of his father—Frank Herbert.

Greg Bear **March 25 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
will discuss his latest novel, *Darwin's Children.*

Meet Our Nebula Nominees **April 8 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
Chat with the authors of our 2002 stories that make the final Nebula ballot.

Go to **www.scifi.com/chat** or link to the chats via our home page (**www.asimovs.com**). Chats are held in conjunction with *Analog* and the Sci-fi Channel and are moderated by *Asimov's* editor, Gardner Dozois.

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HARD TIMES

Neal Barrett, Jr.

The author tells us he's just finished the novel *Prince of Christler-Coke* for Golden Gryphon. It's all about corporate crooks in the future if you can imagine anything that weird happening in real life. His most recent books include *Piggs* and *A Different Vintage*. Both novels were published by Subterranean Press. Mr. Barrett is at work on a novel series called "Maiden Flight"—concerning the search for virgins of several species for the inaugural flight from the New Wyoming Coast. Short fiction by the author will be appearing in a number of places, including a Golden Gryphon anthology celebrating the company's twenty-fifth book, DAW's thirtieth anniversary collection, and infinitematrix.net. He invites readers to check out his own website at *www.nealbarrett.com*.

It's the longest day ever.

Nine, and Dawkit thinks ten will never come. Looks at the clock. Ten's not even there. Someone got it, the phuker is gone. Someone thinks this is funny, Dawkit thinks it's not.

Himpel takes him to lunch. Doesn't know Himpel, never saw Himpel in his life. Phuker's got plaid all over, got plaid phuking shoes, got plaid phuking socks.

"I'm in sales," Himpel says.

"Phuking surprise," Dawkit says.

Can't remember what he ordered, doesn't know he ate at all. Knows he threw up, knows he did that.

The afternoon's worse. Supposed to have Kelp-Helper finished by two. Two-ten, Griggit's on his back, breathing down his neck.

"Company don't stop because it's your Day, Dawkit. Let's get with the grind, let's get with the groove, let's get our ass humping out here."

He gets with the grind, gets with the groove, humps for an hour and a half. Looks at the screen. Doesn't even have Kelp-Helper anymore. Got Soy-Joy and he never heard of that.

Still, it's not a bad day. Clock hasn't got a ten, clock hasn't got a four, but it's *his* phuking Day.

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Guys he hardly knows stop by.

"Hey, hey, go get 'em Stud-boy."

"Hang it in there, pal."

"You the guy, Dawkit, you the man."

Same old shit, but Dawkit doesn't mind, Dawkit feels fine. *Knows* it's his Day.

Best of all, girls who never looked his way are walking past, strolling, strutting, brushing close by, leaving little girlie smiles.

At five, he's certain Leggy Peggy Meck looks at him straight on, looks him in the eye. Hey, why phuking not? She's got to know. Everyone at Nu-Food knows it's his Day.

At 5:22, Dawkit can't even see the screen. All he can see are tall girls, short girls, girls with lazy eyes, girls who walk with lubricated thighs, girls of all sizes, cute as Roach pie.

Five-twenty-nine, Dawkit shuts down, goes to the john. Out of the stall, and Joanie at the mirror, brushing her tangerine hair.

"Hey, hey, Dawkit, this is it, huh, guy? Big Dee-Aiy-Wye."

"Right," Dawkit says, a little irritated, a little surprised, until he remembers it's her Day too. Tomorrow, she'll be under Betulla—same spot as his under Griggit, another VP.

Dawkit doesn't care for Joanie Breen. Stuffy, huffy, pain in the ass. Loud, harsh, unspeakably vile, really bad breath. Still, she is filling out fine, not the same Joanie he recalled. About as different as he is now.

"You're what," Joanie says, "seven? Eight?"

"Eight thirty-six."

"Maybe I'll see you there, huh?"

"Maybe. It could happen. Possibly not."

Joanie puts her brush away. Looks him in the eye.

"We could get together sometime. Two newcomers, see how the hardware works, see how it fits. Got to be frank, got to be honest, don't give a phuk about you, think you're a weenie, think you're a skinny, uncivil little shit. Think you're fussy, boring, and blunt. Just the kind of jerk to get it on with, work the kinks out.

"I want to be pummeled, pounded, hammered right out of my socks, but I want to do it right. Do *not* intend to humiliate myself with some really great guy, okay? We can teach one another strange, bizarre, unspeakable acts, then we'll never have to see each other again. Sound all right with you?"

"Sure, I guess," Dawkit says.

Doesn't even wash up, gets out as quick as he can.

He's out of the office, down in the tube before it really hits, hits him so hard it nearly knocks him down. The last time he'll see the old restroom crowd. The very last time and he didn't even notice it at all. He thinks about it, laughs out loud, sees it all happen in his head. People turn and look and he doesn't even care.

At Mido's, the new suit's ready, waiting in a neat plastic bag. Lilac, pink, and septic green. Narrow lemon cuffs, quarter-inch lapels. Triple-slash pockets, Gladiator Cod, coral tie, and pumpkin shoes.

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Dawkit lets the clerk sell him two new shirts, a leopard and a peacock-blue. The total is staggering, but Dawkit doesn't care. Hey, what you going to wear after it's your Day? Something bright as belly button lint, cheery as dirt, flashy as soot?

After the Mido's bill, everything seems like a bargain, and Dawkit's on a spree. Shove the card in and the slot goes *ping!* Goes *pinga-pinga-ding!* Sings a happy little tune.

Dawkit gets a sack of Amandas, buys a quart of thistleberry wine. Gets a paper lantern, gets a plant that's nearly dead. Gets a red candle and Porko on a stick.

Vows he'll save the Amandas and eats the whole sack. Starts on the Porko, which tastes like beetle shit.

He walks by Karl's, walks by fast. Karl knows everything, Karl knows it's Dawkit's Day. Odds are eight to five he'll have something gross to say.

Karl dashes out and stops him on the spot.

"Let go of me, Karl," Dawkit says, "I don't have time for this, I got a lot to do."

"Sure you do," says Karl, grabs him by the collar, grabs him by the pants, pulls him in the store.

Dawkit doesn't like Karl, doesn't care for him at all. Eyes like a halibut, nose like a frog. Teeth like a broken wood fence. Green stuff, brown stuff, all kinds of awful stuff sticking in between. Terrible stenches, horrible smells, sniffs, whiffs, unearthly odors that would make a hog shiver, make a dog shake.

Dawkit starts edging for the door. Karl's too clever for that.

"Hey-hey-hey," Karl says, spotting the suit in the plastic bag. "Got your love-shoes, man, got your swappo-socks, got everything to match. You a stud-daddy, man, you ready for indecent acts of every sort."

"Get out of my way," Dawkit says, "don't even start."

"Start what?" Karl looks hurt, Karl looks pained.

"What you think I going to start, Dawk? This is your *Day.* Got a present for you, something wrong with that?"

Warning lights blink in Dawkit's head.

"You got a present. A present on my Day."

"That's what I say."

"Why? Why would you be doing that?"

"Because we're friends, Dawk. Don't need any reason to get a present for a friend. We've got differences, isn't no question of that. I am a free, loose, unshackled, mortal creature while you are a vassal, a toady, a dupe, a phuking slave of the vile, corrupt, insidious tyrants who suck our very breath, crush us under their heels, squeeze the very life from our souls.

"Other than that, Dawk, we pretty good friends, all right? Here, man, I got this special for you."

Karl reaches under the dust, under the rubble, under the vast array of crap on the counter of his store, and hands across his present in a dirty paper sack.

Dawkit knows exactly what it is. Karl does books. Books, ancient tapes, and primal CDs. Nobody buys the books, nobody ever did.

"I don't know what to say," Dawkit says.

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"Forget it," says Karl. "It's your Day, kid."

He hangs up the suit, shuts the closet door. Opens it again so he can see. Slips in the CD. It's Artery Pulse No. 3. Felony, first offense, some phuker walks by and hears.

His screen is full of ads. Clothes, cameras, catalogs, colognes. Secret colonics from Warsaw and France.

The ads have been coming for a week. There's a list somewhere, whoever's about to have a Day.

A blink on the screen in carmine and cerise. Harsh enough, bright enough, to severely burn the eye. The blink says

read me now

Underneath that it says

Compensation
Aggravation
Med
Bed
Retirement

TAX

Twenty-seven other things Dawkit doesn't understand.

After that, everything he's bought for the last thirty days.

Dawkit is appalled. Awed, startled, taken aback. Is all that really his? It's his, all right. He's in the yellow, closing on the red.

Phuk, he can't even eat. This stuff will chew up the VP raise in a nano and a half.

He can take back the suit. Absolutely not. No way he's taking back the suit. The suit goes together with the Day.

"I'll get caught up, I'll get it all straight," Dawkit says. "I'll take it easy a while, because this is my Day. . . ."

TAPPITY-TAP! He nearly jumps out of his skin.

Cyl never waits, Cyl barges right in.

"Not now," Dawkit says, "go away, Cyl."

"I guess I'm overwhelmed. Where you been, man?"

Dawkit doesn't answer, Cyl doesn't care.

Cyl flops on the bed. Pulls the paper lantern from the sack. Holds it like it's maybe something dead.

"Honestly, Dawk, where do you get this shit?"

"It's not your shit, it's my shit, Cyl."

"Righto-roo. Got me there, you do. Huh-oh, what we got here?" She opens up the thistleberry wine. Takes a healthy sip, makes a little face.

"Don't knock it. That's good stuff."

"I'm not used to the good stuff, man."

Dawkit takes the bottle, pours them each a glass.

Cyl looks at him, traces a circle on her knee.

"Hey-hey, away we go. Last night with the peasant folk, stud."

"Last night, Cyl."

"Who'm I going to fight with when you gone, man?"

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"You'll find someone, I'm not worried 'bout that. No one's here, you'll talk to the phuking wall."

"Yeah? Maybe I'll get my act together, get out of this dump."

"Uh-huh."

"Don't think I can, right?"

"Didn't say that."

"Don't have to, dope."

Cyl springs up, does a kick, does a hop, does a hip shot.

"Super sexpot, huh? What you think, babe, I got it, or what?"

Lean, lank, angles, and knobs, straight up and down. Scrawny, bony, gawky, and flat, skinny as a slat. Dawkit tries to imagine lovely, Leggy Peggy Meck ever looking like that.

"Phuk you too," Cyl says, she can read his answer clear, "couple years back, *you* didn't look much better, pal."

"You can do it. You can do it if you like. You can do it, you can sit on your ass and talk about it, Cyl."

"Phuk you twice."

"You're nineteen, Cyl. You can't be a whatever all your life."

"Sticker-stacker, Dawk. I stack stickers. That's what I *want* to do, man. 'Sides, maybe I don't want to be a sex trap, pal. You ever think about that? A lot of kinky studs really like to get it on with someone like me."

"That's foul, that's nasty, that's sick. Don't defile yourself, Cyl, don't do shit that's unclean."

Cyl gives him a smirk, a dirty little smile, delighted she's said something wicked and vile.

"Okay, right. You lose, I win. I'm starving, Dawk. What you got to eat in this dump?"

"Dogtail soup. Vole. Mole. Yesterday's toast. Slotting the card a bit heavy this week. Cutting down a little on the food."

"Figures," says Cyl. "Got to save something for the phuking dead plant. . . ."

Dawkit gets to the clinic early, starts punching data out. Doesn't the Company have all this shit somewhere? If he didn't have the phuking points, he wouldn't *be* here, right?

Guys on one side, babes on the other. Lots of chatter here, lots of sneaky looks. The further up the line, the quieter it gets. Now, no one's looking at anybody else. Everyone's got a plastic bag. Everyone pretends there's nobody there.

Dopey-looking nurse says go to the right, go to the left. Go in there and take off your clothes.

Dawkit doesn't care much for that. The room's too small, there's three other guys. He turns to the wall, takes off his drab, baggy suit and stuffs it in the trash. Two of the guys are gone. He sits on a bench and stares at the wall.

The other dork's out of there, he's waiting all alone. Now he's getting scared, shaky, somewhat alarmed. They're running guys through like a minute and a half. Shouldn't it take a little longer, make sure you get it right?

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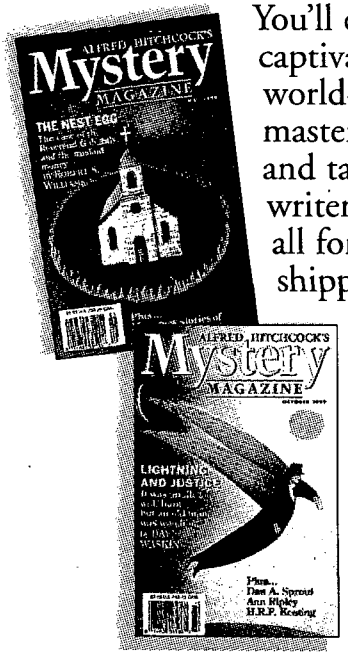

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"What's the big hurry here, people, I got the time."

Someone says *"DAWKIT, TWO-TWO-EIGHT-NINE-FOUR-ESS-BEE-JAY, STEP UP TO THE LINE. . . ."*

Jumps up naked, hops through the door. Stops in his tracks. Nearly turns around and goes back.

Phuking doctor is a *woman!* Looks like his mother. This is serious shit, don't you people know that?

"Climb-up-lie-down-spread-em-out-wide."

Dawkit won't look, shuts his eyes tight.

"Take it easy, okay? You won't feel a thing, lad."

Lad? Shit, this is bad. . . .

She pokes, punches, pushes, and probes. Sticks him with something cold. Takes all the fuzz off it's taken him three years to grow.

Doesn't want to say it. Feels like he should.

"Give me a good one, Doc, okay?"

"You get the one with your number on it. We been holding it for you since it was *that* big, son."

Holds up two fingers, quarter of an inch in between. Gives him a terrible grin. She might be Karl's mother, not his.

"Wait a minute," says Dawkit, "I want to talk to somebody else. . . ."

Wakes up sore, can hardly even walk. Hauls on his brand new suit. Guy in a nurse-coat hands him a thick, heavy book, no title, cover in black. Rushes him out the door.

What the phuk, right? You don't even get to look at it, how do you know it's there?

He thinks about stopping, taking a peek. Seems like a bad idea. He can see it when he gets back home.

It hits him, then, and he laughs out loud. He can see it *any*time, whack it, smack it, stick it in anything he likes. It's his, now, for the rest of his life.

He can feel it, the tingle, the quiver, and the glow. He's not the same person anymore. It's a brand new Dawkit, and a brand new world. The shops, the parks, the broad avenues don't even look the same.

For a minute, for a blink—the habit's hard to break—he almost joins the drab parade. Keep off the left, keep to the right. Right's for the skinnies, for the guys like sticks, for the babes like twigs. This is where he's been, this is what he wore. A flat, mat, slack-back Neutsuit the color of lint, like all the scarecrows. Just like the one he trashed only half an hour ago.

Now, Dawkit's on the left, with the bright, with the shiny, with the lurid and the glitz. With the ruby, with the rosy, with the purple, and the plum. With the yellow, with the gold, with the stripe, with the streak, with the screaming-bloody-red.

And all around him are the studs with shoulders, the studs with broad chests. The dudes with rods, the dudes with cods, the dudes with ties and flashy vests.

Not that Dawkit cares, for all he can see are the butts, boobs, and belly buttons by the score. Hard, soft, sweet and perky tits, and, somewhere in a dark and secret place, brand new, shiny little clits.

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"Is there any way," Dawkit says to himself, "any way I could put it to them all in one day?"

For now, though, he's beat, achy, and sore, and all he wants to do is fall in bed.

Somebody's already there. Somebody's Cyl.

"What do you want, what are you doing here?" Dawkit says, stopping at his door. "Get out of my bed."

"Waiting," Cyl says, "waiting for you. How'd it go, man? Wow, do you look grand!"

"Yes, I do, and I'm beat, Cyl. I don't want to talk, all right?"

"Okay. Your bed, man." Cyl gets up. Doesn't go away.

Dawkit peels off his jacket. A cloud of lilac and green drifts across the chair. Kicks off his shoes, tosses the book on the bed.

Cyl grabs it up, starts flipping through.

"Hey-hey-hey! Wow, looka this!"

Dawkit snatches it away. "You're not supposed to see that. Not authorized."

"Secrets of the super-stud, right?"

"You're not supposed to, okay."

"You're not supposed to, okay," Cyl says, pushing her voice down as far as it will go.

"That'll do. You can go now."

"How many cute-ohs you prong on the way home? Two? Four? Thirty-seven, thirty-eight?"

"What is it with you? You saving up this shit to put on me? You want to read that thing, get off your ass and earn one like everybody else."

Her eyes dart quickly away. He's almost sorry. He knows his words have struck home.

"Hey, forget it. I'm beat. I got to go to work tomorrow, move on top of that."

"Okay."

"Okay, what?"

"Can I at least *look* at it?"

"No you can't look at it. You're not supposed to."

"Big phuking deal. Seen you in the shower couple hundred times."

"Not like this you haven't."

"Dawk—"

"Out of here, Cyl."

Cyl gets a funny little gleam, a little sparkle in her eye. "Bet you haven't seen it yourself. Bet that's why you want me out of here."

"It is not!"

Cyl claps her hands. "Oh, boy, right on the button. What's the matter, 'fraid they got it upside down or something?"

"Goodnight, Cyl."

"Huh-uh. No way, man."

Cyl doesn't move, doesn't go away. Instead, she reaches down and calmly unfastens his belt. Dawkit's heart is stuck in his throat. He can't believe he's just standing there, letting her do this. Can't believe he'd do *any*thing to stop her doing it now.

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And something's going on down there. Something strange and wonderful he's only heard about before. He looks down, catches his breath. For the very first time, he looks at his brand new part, stares at the ever-growing spectacle of himself.

"My God," he cries out, "it's wonderful, it works!"

"It's *awful!*" Cyl says, makes a funny sound, runs for the bathroom, doesn't even make it to the door.

"It's because she's a Neut," Dawkit says, "never saw a stud before."

He hopes this is so. If a babe throws up every time, it's not going to be as much fun as everybody says. . . .

He's tired and he's still a little sore. And that's okay, it's the start of a whole new life, a brand new job. He's finally got his parts, he can wear his stud suit.

The guys joke around, the girls treat him fine. When he gets to the real Men's Room for the very first time, there's a sign says

STAND UP AND DO IT
LIKE A MAN, DAWK !

And all the guys have signed.

Even Griggit's nice. He gives Dawkit his best frosty smile. He gives him six days' work, says get it back at noon.

Dawkit gets it done. 11:57 on the dot. Griggit's sec tells him Griggit's gone for the day.

"I'm going to ask her," Dawkit tells Figger at lunch.

"She tells me to go to hell, fine. I'm asking anyway."

"You're talking executive stuff, my man. You don't ask her, she asks *you*."

"Phuk that. All she can say is no."

"We could have a drink, we could go to dinner sometime," Dawk says.

"No," says Leggy Peggy Meck, "absolutely not."

"We could have lunch."

"Yeah. Thanks anyway, Phawk."

"Dawk."

"Right." Leggy Peggy walks off. Somebody snickers. Maybe it's Brokel, maybe it's Klop.

"What did I tell you," Figger says. "Why you gotta start at the top? What's the matter with Crazy Betts? Hot-spot Dixie? How about Joanie Breen?"

Dawkit's sick of hearing all about Joanie Breen. Guys are buzzing around her like bees. What's she going to do, wear it out the very first day? He doesn't want Joanie, he doesn't want Betts. Who he wants is Leggy Peggy Meck.

A buzz from Philly Bean says get here at once. Dawkit doesn't like the sound of that.

Philly lays it out: "Liabilities: Two-two-eight-seven-four. Assets: You got

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no assets, Dawk. I'm punching in your EQN, I'm punching in your Tax. I'm dropping in your CDE, adding up your RAX."

"So? What's all that supposed to mean?"

"You ever look at your homesite, Dawk? I put all this on your screen."

"Just tell me, okay? Plain language, I don't do number shit."

"No number shit, huh?" Philly shows him a big Accounting grin. "Means you keep on spending, pal, I'm jerking your phuking card."

"I got a raise now, I can handle this."

"No way. You're eating next week's groceries, man."

"I'm not eating this week's groceries, Bean."

"Good idea." Philly taps Dawkit off the screen. "Keep your gut flat a couple months, you got this mother whipped."

His new rooms are cramped, they need a lot of paint. He's even further from work than when he'd been a Neut.

The rent's nearly double, the tube's a dozen blocks away.

"Every time I get a break, I go deeper in debt. What's the sense of getting this stuff, I'm not having any fun?"

Dawk gets a glass of water, tries not to think about food. Thinks of the girls he could call. What difference does it make who he puts it in? They're all babes, right?

"How do I know Leggy Peggy's any better than Hot-spot Dixie? I don't even know what better is."

Calls everybody on the list. Twenty-three numbers, nobody's home. Calls up Peggy Meck. Peggy Meck answers at once. Dawkit gets the chills, Dawkit gets the sweats and hangs up.

One thing he promised himself, long before his Day. The first time had to be a babe. He would not, no matter what, do it by himself. Guys did, all the time, but Dawk couldn't see why. Why would you want to do something like that? All by yourself?

That was 1:22. He finds out at 1:46. And 3:14. And again at 5:02. On the way to the office, he's sure everyone in the tube, everyone on the street, knows exactly what he's done. . . .

He doesn't talk to anyone. Not even Figger, not even Mish. Throws himself into the job. Even Griggit's impressed. End of the week, he gives Dawkit work from the other VPs.

To save a little dough, he works through lunch, walks to work and back. One meal a day, the cheapest he can find. By the time he gets home, he can't even think about Leggy Peggy Meck.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" asks Figger. "You're acting like a nut."

"Phuk off," Dawkit says.

Philly Bean from Accounting stops by. Pats him on the back. "Numbers are looking good. Keep it up, pal."

Dawkit's too busy, he doesn't even hear.

End of the week, Dawkit can't stand it any more. Takes the tube west. Second-best restaurant in town. Chokes down everything in sight. Drinks the good stuff, never asks the price.

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11:49, knocks on Peggy Meck's door. Leggy Peggy answers. Looking good, looking fine, looking like she does when he does it by himself.

"Peggy Meck, I've got to phuk you," Dawk says, before green eyes can nail him to the floor. "I got to do it right now!"

"Sure, fine," Peggy says.

"Yeah, but—"

"I said no dinner, no lunch. You didn't ask for anything else, Kawk."

Kawk, Phawk, Dawkit doesn't care.

A night with Peggy Meck opens up whole new worlds. Babes are even better than he'd thought. Doing it, and doing it with a babe, is like soy on a shingle is to steak.

After Peggy, the rest is easy. He does it with Betts, Hot-spot Dixie, Francine and Markie and Macey and Kay. Jeddie and Teddi and Rae. Cappy and Tappy and Bix ask *him.*

He starts eating well again. Eating this, eating that, eating everything he can. Have to eat, man, keep up your strength. Has to take the tube, he's too tired to walk.

Knows he has to give up something, something's got to give. Can't give up the important stuff. Gives up what he won't miss. Gives up work, doesn't do anything at all.

Griggit knows he's got trouble on his hands. His new workhorse has turned into a sloth. Griggit's been around for a while, knows how to fix a problem like this. Dawkit can produce. An employee who produces can produce a lot more. The answer is clear. Double the workload, get the train back on the track.

Dawk doesn't notice, Dawk doesn't care. Work turns up on the left, he shoves it to the right.

"Get with it," Figger says. "The word is out. The axe is falling, pal."

"Phuk it, Figg. Griggit hasn't said a thing."

"Griggit never does," Figger says.

Philly calls him in at 4:36.

"What is it with you? Don't you listen to anything, Dawk? Didn't we have this talk before?"

"I'm doing the best I can."

"Don't even start. Don't talk, just listen to me. This is your CREDIT," and Philly draws a little box. "Your CREDIT comes from what you make. You can take everything out of your box, do anything you like. We'll even fill it up again every two weeks."

"I'm not some dumb little kid. I don't need a picture, Bean."

"You're worse than a dumb little kid. You're a big dumb grownup. And now you're a hungry grownup, pal, because I am red-lining your card—" Bean taps a key, and the key goes *ping!* "—right now."

"You can't do that."

"Want to see me do it again?"

"I haven't run up that much," Dawkit says. "I been cutting down."

"Uh-huh, right. Look at the little box. Take away **DEDUCT** take away **TAX.** Take away **FOOD,** take away **RENT,** and all the crap you buy. Take away **TOLLS.** Take away **BIO,** take away—"

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"Hold it," Dawkit says. "What's this Bio stuff, I didn't buy anything like that."

Philly Bean grins. Philly Bean loves Accounting, this is where he lives, this is what he does.

"You're putting me on, Dawk. You're not, are you? You're a dumb little kid."

"I didn't buy any of that. You can't redline me for something I didn't do."

Philly opens his drawer. Drops three little books in Dawkit's lap. "You get these when you joined the Company? Four years ago? You get this one when you did your Day?"

"I don't look at this shit, I haven't got time."

"You got time. Take a look now."

Dawkit reads the titles. The titles say

WORLDCORP EMPLOYEES POLICIES & PROCEDURES

WORLDCORP EMPLOYEES SALARY & DEDUCTION PLAN

WORLDCORP EMPLOYEES BIO ATTACHMENT PLAN

"That one," Dawkit points, "what the hell's that all about?"

"Storage. Installation. Usage Fees."

"I *earned* that thing," Dawkit says, "it goes with the promotion. You saying it's another damn bill?"

"You earn your food, babe. But you gotta pay for it."

"Don't give me that, that's not the same thing. Anyway, that—usage fee is a crock. You weren't there, how do *you* know how many times I use it?"

"I don't," Philly says. "Not my department, man."

He leaves before five and starts walking. Can't stand to go home, can't stand to be alone.

All along the streets, down the happy avenues, people are eating, people are drinking, having lots of fun. He tries not to think about food. Tries not to think about Markie and Macey and Tappy and Bix. Can't even call them, hasn't got a card.

Why didn't somebody tell him this shit? Hey, who knew?

When Dawkit looks up, he finds he's wandered into the Neut Quarter, back to his stomping grounds. Only a block from his old place, half a block from Cyl's. How did that happen, he wants to know?

Dawkkit's stomach knows how. Doesn't want to see Cyl, wants to see her fridge.

It's dark, and he doesn't see Karl until it's too late. Karl steps out of the shadows, drags him in the store.

"Hey-hey, Superstud returns. How goes the prongin' trade, boy?"

"Don't breathe on me," Dawkit says, "you're making me sick. Haven't got time, got a lot of things to do."

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"Right," Karl says, "I can see you in a hurry, you pretty pressed for time."

Dawkit pulls away, Karl hangs on. Pulls him through a curtain in the back, sits him in a chair. Doesn't say a thing. Sets a plate of realchik, semisoup, dirtbread, the works, in front of Dawk. Sets a glass of Idaho Scotch on the table, stands back to watch.

Half an hour later, half another glass, Dawkit's told Karl everything. No more babes, no more credit, the whole sad bit.

"You done it up good," Karl says, running a hand through scraggle-dog hair. "This is what happens, boy, a man sells his God-given rights to get something hanging 'tween his legs, something belongs to him anyway."

"Don't you start, Karl, I don't need a phuking speech."

"No, you surely don't. What you need is food in your belly, chickie now and then, little plastic in your pocket, man."

"Right. Only I don't have any of that. Or any way to get it. Thanks for the food, thanks for the booze. I appreciate that."

"Sit down, Dawk."

"What for?"

Karl disappears behind a door. Comes back, sets a paper box in front of Dawk.

"Let's see," he says, pulling out this and pulling out that, "Fauxsteak, Pastapaste, Wheato, Dirtbeans, Chinko—what else we got here? Two bottles Oklahoma chablis, not the best, don't anything taste like nothing these days. . . ."

"Karl—" Dawkit pulls out his chair and stares. "Where the hell you get this stuff? That's about my entire salary for four months!"

"That's if you *havin'* a salary, man."

Dawkit shakes his head. "I can't take this. No way I could ever pay you back."

"Don't want to get paid back. Just want a little favor, old friend. . . ."

"I miss havin' you around," Cyl says. "Bet you having too much fun to be thinking 'bout me."

"Sure," Dawk tells her, "I'm having a ball."

"What you doing with Karl? Thought you didn't like him at all."

"Not doing anything, Cyl."

"Saw you doing it, Dawk. Saw you coming out, man."

Dawkit doesn't answer. Doesn't have to. Cyl knows what's doing in his head.

"Don't mess with him. Karl's no good, he's bad news, you know?"

"I'm bad news, Cyl. Okay?"

"Okay," Cyl says. And, for the first time he can recall, Cyl doesn't push him real hard, Cyl just lets him go. He thinks about that. Catching it from Cyl is one thing he misses a lot.

It's not hard to get the stuff Karl wants to see. Programs, profits, personnel. What a Neut, what a skrag, what a scruff like Karl wants with shit like this, Dawkit can't say, it's nothing important at all.

Karl is pleased. Karl gives Dawkit Shamham, Fakebake, burgundy

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from Bald Knob, Arkansas. Then he tells Dawkit what else he can do.

The second time's easier, a snap after that. Dawkit doesn't care what Karl does with this crap. Karl wants to dream he's back tossing crud-bombs at Caddies and Jags, that's great. Dawkit's never eaten so well in his life.

Griggit thinks Dawkit is grand. His new VP is a workhorse again. Griggit finds more stuff for Dawkit to do.

Dawkit pulls back, doesn't go on a spree. Doesn't give up on the babes, not about to do that. Doesn't do the numbers, goes in for class. Leggy Peggy Meck. Daniella and Clareen.

Keeps an eye on his readout, too. Still in the hole, but he's climbing out again.

Next time he sees Karl, Karl wants mates, brats, homes, and phones of everybody over VP. Dawkit feels something kind of funny, something like tiny little mice turning over inside.

"Huh-uh. Can't do that, keep the groceries, man. Don't know what you're up to, but I don't like it a bit."

"No problem," Karl says. "I don't get it from you, get it from somebody else. Got some fine Veggies here. Almost like new."

"Phuk 'em, I'm out of here."

Philly drops the readout on his desk. Philly says, "I thought better of you. What you think you're doing, man? What the phuk we got here?"

Dawkit takes a look. Seventeen things he didn't buy. Things he never heard of before, things that cost a lot of dough.

"Got to be a mistake," he tells Bean, "that isn't me."

"Right," Bean says, "couldn't be you, you stupid shit."

Dawkit finds a payphone outside.

"Okay," he tells Karl, "I'll do it. Just tell me how you got that crap on *my* bill?"

Karl laughs at that. "You think balls and brains is the same thing, boy? Drop on by when you can."

Twenty-two minutes later, Bean's at his desk again.

"I got to apologize, Dawk. Something got hung in the computer, pal. Matter of fact, your balance is looking fine."

Dawkit is anything but pleased. If Karl and his crazies can make him a pauper in a punch, they can do worse than that. With the stuff Dawkit's doing, they can turn the phuking Company inside out. They'll have to start over on the back of an envelope.

He remembers Karl's last words on the phone: "You want to eat, you want to do a chick? You want to live in a box somewhere? Whatever, man. . . ."

It scares him to death, his heart nearly stops. There's only one copy, and he has to break into Griggit's desk before he gets back.

"That's it," he tells Karl, "no more, I quit. I'm not cut out for this."

"One more and we're done. You be out of it, man. Gone, finished. Off the hook for good."

"Sure. You sucked me in, now you let me go."

"You got no trust, babe. You been a slave, a vassal, a toady of the Com-

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pany too long. You dealing with friends, now. People you can count on, man."

"And if I don't?"

"We screw you to the wall, friend."

"What do you want?"

"Security layout. Company Tower."

"Oh shit," Dawkit says.

He wouldn't do it. No matter what. Knew it the minute he left and Karl knew it too. Dawkit was scared, frantic, freaked out of his wits. This was the end. No turning back, nowhere to go. Karl would fix him good.

And, if Karl didn't fix him, the phuking Company would. No food, no babes. No place to sleep. He tries to leave town he's got to walk, no taxi, no tube. If he eats, he's got to steal. Grab a sack of turnip fries, Hoppers, Breado, Weedies somewhere.

Back at his place, he grabs up an extra pair of pants. All the food he's got, stuffs it in a sack. One last look. Leave it. Phuk it, whatever it is, he doesn't need it now—

Goes to the door. Freezes right there. Someone's outside, someone in the hall. A shadow moves beneath the door. He backs off slowly, through the window to the ledge outside. Lets himself go, rolls, comes to his feet. The man's right there, right in Dawkit's face. Right behind him there's another guy as well.

"Where you heading, man?" the guy wants to know.

"Out. Walk. Going for a walk. Walking's what I do."

"What you want to do, you want to come with us, Mr. Dawkit, you don't want to make any trouble, want to come real easy, pal."

"Huh-uh. Don't want to!"

"We understand that, sir, don't suppose you do."

"Got to, though," says the other guy.

"Got the papers right here," says Number One. "Repo Order, *Bio Attachment Dawkit: two-two-eight-nine-four-Ess-Bee-Jay.* Get you to the clinic, fix you up quick."

"In and out, friend," says Number Two, "won't take a jif, won't feel a thing."

"Hey, now, just a minute!" Dawkit backs off, feels those mice in his tummy again.

Number One shows him a nasty grin. "You been playin' without payin', son. If you'll jus—"

Dawkit hits him with his sack. The blow makes a terrible sound. Dawk smells Oklahoma wine. The other guy shouts, curses, waves his arms about.

Dawkit runs as hard as he can. Runs, stops, tries to catch his breath. A small grocery store across the street. Dawkit walks in, gets a cart, starts down the aisle. A man's in the store and a girl. He follows the girl.

She turns to get a can. Dawkit grabs her purse from the cart, sticks it in his shirt. Smiles at the clerk, makes it to the street before the kid begins to shout.

Finds a booth quick, shoves in the card.

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Cyl says, "What, who's this?"

"You know who it is, no names, Cyl."

"Huh? What's the matter with you?"

"In the park. Where the dude sells the flowers. Twenty minutes. Don't be phuking late."

"Oh, man—!"

Dawkit hangs up. Tosses the card away. No good now, the babe's already canceled, he's lucky he got it in.

He picks the park because Cyl knows where it is. She's already there, standing by the fountain in the dark. He waits. A minute and a half. Checks the trees, checks the streets.

Reaches out, pulls her into shadow, grabs her shoulders tight.

"Damn it, stop that, Dawk." Cyl pulls away, shakes her head, backs off. "What is the *matter* with you!"

"I'm in big trouble, Cyl. Can't explain it right now. I haven't got a card, haven't got anything, they're looking for me. Right now. You got to help. I need you to—What is it, Cyl, what's that?"

Cyl looks over his shoulder. Dawkit turns around fast and Karl's standing there. Karl, and two other guys. Dawkit looks at Cyl. Cyl turns away.

"I had to, you know? I *needed* things. Lost that dumb job, lost my room, man, didn't have anywhere to go."

"It's okay." Dawkit lets out a breath. He wishes he could lie down, take a little nap.

"Okay, Karl. What happens now?"

"You are truly stupid, Dawk, you know that? Had you a good thing going, eatin' right, getting yourself all straight. I'd of fixed it you don't owe *nobody,* friend. Wouldn't have to worry 'bout losing that fine new toy no more. . . ."

Dawkit looks at the two men standing off the path, looks at Karl again. "Okay, what? What happens now, what you got in mind?"

Karl shakes his head. "You mean them? Hey, isn't going to be nothing like that. Just want to help you get your mind clear on a couple of things. Like, you maybe figure it'd go down better if you was to tell the Company what kinda shit you and me been doing, friend."

Dawkit laughs at that. He doesn't think it's funny, but he doesn't want to pee, doesn't want to cry.

"You really worried, Karl? You think those phuks are going to pat me on the head, they find I've been stealing 'em blind?"

"Don't think so, Dawk. Want to be sure that *you* don't either."

Karl shows him a sly, nasty little wink. "You take care now, man. Living's a bitch, but there's nothing else to be, nothing 'cept you maybe dead. . . ."

When they're gone, when they vanish in the dark, Dawk wishes he'd said something vile, something foul, something really mean to Cyl. He knows, though, he doesn't really want to do it, just thought he did.

His watch says a little after three when he knocks very softly on the door. Joanie Breen peeks out, looking sleepy, looking pissed, looking like she isn't real happy at all.

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"You know what time it is, Dawk?"

"Why does everybody say that, Joanie, why do they say the same thing all the time, you ever think about that? Why doesn't someone say, 'I *know* what time it is, it's three-oh-three, get the phuk out of here.'"

"Get the phuk out of here, Dawk. Okay?"

Joanie shuts the door. Dawk sticks his foot in, steps inside.

"I have to talk to you, babe. It's real important or I wouldn't bother you this time of night."

"Don't you ever call me *babe,* Dawk. Not ever, you hear?"

Joanie sighs into the sofa, yawns and scratches her head. She doesn't look cute this way, but Dawk doesn't care.

"I'm in trouble. A lot of trouble, okay?"

"So you thought of me."

"I had to get off the street fast. I know you live close by. They're after me, I can't walk around out there."

"I'm supposed to be grateful you thought of me? You don't like me, Dawk. I don't like you."

"I thought we could get around that. You know, we had the same Day. . . ."

"They. What *they* are we talking about here?"

He tells her, then, tells her why his card won't work, how the repo guys came to get him, what happened after that. Tells her everything, leaves out the parts about Karl.

"I'm not going to let them, Joanie. I worked real hard to get it, I won't let 'em take it back."

Joanie Breen looks puzzled, sleepy, doesn't look pleased with him at all.

"So you're going to do what? Run? Go somewhere else? There isn't any somewhere *else,* Dawk. Everywhere's here, and everywhere's nowhere you haven't got a card. So they take your goodies, so what? What's the big deal?"

"So *what?*"

"So straighten up, stupid. Get to work, earn it back. You got it once, you can get it back again."

"No, huh-uh, no way." Dawk looked appalled, stunned at the whole idea. "You don't understand, I couldn't do that. Go back the way I was, go back to Neutsuits, looking at girls and knowing what it's like?

"I *love* doing this, Joanie. Phuking is my life. I don't want to work, I don't want to think, I don't want to do anything else. I love my dingie, and I won't give it back."

"Come here," Joanie says.

"Do what?"

"Just come here, okay?"

Dawk goes to her. Joanie drops her robe, lets it slide to a puddle at her feet. Dawkit stares. He can't imagine why he ever thought Joanie wasn't worthy of his list. Joanie's fantastic! Joanie Breen belongs on a list by herself.

"You like, huh? Joanie says 'let's get together, Dawk, try the new hardware, see how it works.' *You* walk out of the john, you don't even answer, you shit!"

"I was wrong, Joanie, I was terribly rude and I'd like to apologize for that—"

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"Forget it. That's history, this is right now. Let's do it. You want to do it, don't you, Dawk?"

"Oh, man. I never wanted anyone as much as I want you, Joanie Breen!"

"Then what are you waiting for? What's keeping you, pal?"

"Nothing. You're great, you're the best, you're top of the line."

"But *you're* not, Dawk. You don't got a dingie, you got a little pinkie, you got a little stub. A pinkie, a worm, a wienie, a nub. A snippet, a pimple, barely a bump. What you got, pal, is a knob, a flopppy, a stump. A drooper, a noodle, a pimple, a speck. A minute member, a pecker that's barely picayune. You got absolutely nothing I can use. . . ."

"No, wait," Dawk says, and he's hot, he's cold, and the mice in his belly are climbing the walls. "This is temporary, Joanie, this is a lapse, wait just a second, I can feel it, I can feel it getting up!"

Joanie's not waiting, Joanie's in her robe now, she's looking for a drink.

"I'm fine, all right? I told you—I got away from those guys. They didn't get me, they didn't take me in."

"Didn't have to. Shut you off at the clinic, pal. Little light goes *blink!* That's it."

"No, huh-uh, they can't do that."

Joanie pours herself a hefty glass of Arizona gin, doesn't even turn around.

"Don't have to take off the plumbing, you stupid shit. Don't have to catch you, just turn the phuker off."

"Quit saying that!"

"You want a drink, pal?"

"No. I can make it work, all right? Slip off the robe, do it kinda slow. I am hot for you, woman, I am steaming, I am screaming for your stuff. I am all over your bod, love bitch, I am climbing your bones. I can feel it, Joanie, it's doing, it's growing, I got the iron babe, and it's ready to go!"

"No it's not, Dawk. Just get out of here. Now. Close the door behind you. And don't call me babe, I feel I mentioned that before."

"It could happen. It could happen right now. What the hell's your hurry, we got all night."

"I don't think so."

"What?"

"Your ears not working either? I'm thinking howlers on the way. Shriekers, sirens, blinking bloody lights. Someone's on your tail, *babe.*"

"You called 'em, you turned me in!"

"Saw you running up the street, friend. Didn't have to ask. Everyone in the office knows you're a nutso, Dawk. You too dumb to figure that?"

Dawkit hears them now, hears the whoopas, hears the squawkers, hears the rabid wail.

"You could've—given me a chance, you didn't have to do that."

"You kidding? I *love* my new parts, man. Feeling good, having a ball. I'm going to give 'em up for *you?*

"Cheers, you dumb phuk," says Joanie Breen, tipping her glass of gin. "Don't catch your whacker on the way out. . . ."

* * *

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Down the stairs, down the street, down the narrow avenues. Through the alley, through the dark, through the cold and empty park.

Dawk can hear the screechers, hear the howlers, hear the raw and awful din, see the reds and the blues as they blink against the black and dreadful night.

He's had it, he's finished, he's all alone now, and nowhere to go. Stuck with a dinkie, with a pinkie just hanging there with nothing to do. Nothing to do but dangle there and pee. Nothing to think about but Dirtbread, Mousehead, Catbristle stew. No one to think about but Markie, Macey, Tappy, and Bix. Dixie, Teddi, and Leggy Peggy Meck.

He can't think of any way to do himself in. Bends down, searches through the gutter. There's nothing more deadly than half a paper sack, nothing sharper than a leaf.

If he had a card left he could buy a piece of rope. If it wasn't so late, he could throw himself under a cab, maybe find a truck.

Looks up in the dark. Sees a building there. Maybe he can jump off that. Huh-unh, no way, too phuking high, he'll never make it to the top—

"Dawk, what on earth you *doing* down here? You scared me half to death!"

Dawkit's heart nearly stops. Cyl's on the sidewalk, skinny arms wrapped about her scrawny-bony self. She's cold, and she hasn't got a wrap.

"What are *you* doing, Cyl, I could ask you that."

"Haven't got anywhere to go, Dawk. Don't know anywhere but the park."

"Go see your big buddy Karl. Turn me in again. Maybe he'll give you a cup of something hot."

"Can't, Dawk. Karl tossed me out. Said I had to do something awful, something vile and nasty with him. Told him I was going to be disgusting, I'd do it with you instead."

"I guess I appreciate that."

"I miss you, Dawk. I know I did wrong, and I wouldn't ever do it again."

"Yeah, you would, Cyl, but forget about that. I don't think sleeping in the park's such a good idea. I don't know a lot about trees. There's boxes and stuff, you can find 'em in the alley. I've seen people do it before."

"I wouldn't mind that, Dawk. Not if I could be with you. You can't prong me or nothing, though, you're aware of that. I haven't got any parts."

"Yeah, well, phuk it," Dawk says, listening for whoopers, looking for blinky lights. "We'll work something out. . . ." O

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ILLUSION'S LURE

Magic is coy and subtle, frail and sweet:
a gift an adept calls, never compels.
The price of magic always is deceit.

The novice yearns for power with vast conceit
to call the demons forth from darkest hells.
True magic's coy and subtle, frail and sweet.

The apprentice scorns mere gold as indiscreet;
won't hear the words the weary world tells:
the price of magic always is deceit.

The hard-learned lesson: sorcerers must eat,
And cannot trust the potency of spells;
For magic's coy and subtle, frail and sweet.

Don't trust enchantment: wizards always cheat.
It is not magic, but flash and fire, that sells:
The price of magic always is deceit.

Against a deft illusion, no spells compete;
Trust smoke and mirrors, trap doors and pungent smells.
True magic's coy and subtle, frail and sweet;
The price of magic always is deceit.

—Geoffrey A. Landis

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JUNE SIXTEENTH AT ANNA'S

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Kristine Kathryn Rusch is the only person to win the Hugo award for both editing and writing. Her *Asimov's* story, "Millennium Babies" (January 2000), won the Hugo in 2001 for best novelette. That year, she also won the Herodotus Award for best historical mystery (for *A Dangerous Road,* written as Kris Nelscott) and the Romantic Times Reviewers Choice Award (for *Utterly Charming,* a paranormal romance written as Kristine Grayson). Her most recent novel, *Extremes,* will be published in June by Roc Books.

June Sixteenth at Anna's. To a conversation connoisseur, those words evoke the most pivotal afternoon in early twenty-first century historical entertainment. No one knows why these conversations have elevated themselves against the thousands of others found and catalogued.

Theories abound. Some speculate that the variety of conversational types makes this one afternoon special. Others believe this performance is the conversational equivalent of early jazz jam sessions—the points and counterpoints have a beauty unrelated to the words. Still others hypothesize that it is the presence of the single empty chair which allows the visitor to join the proceedings without feeling like an intruder. . . .

—liner notes from *June Sixteenth at Anna's,*
special six-hour edition

On the night after his wife's funeral, Mac pulled a chair in front of the special bookcase, the one he'd built for Leta over forty years ago, and flicked on the light attached to the top shelf. Two copies of every edition ever produced of *June Sixteenth at Anna's*—one opened and one permanently in its wrapper—winked back at him as if they shared a joke.

Scattered between them, copies of the books, the e-jackets, the DVDs, the out-dated Palms, all carrying analysis, all holding maybe a mention of Leta and what she once called the most important day of her life.

A whiff of lilacs, a jangle of gold bracelets, and then a bejeweled hand reached across his line of sight and turned the light off.

"Don't torture yourself, Dad," his daughter Cherie said. She was older than the shelf, her face softening with age, just as her mother's had. With

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another jangle of bracelets, she clicked on a table lamp, then sat on the couch across from him, a couch she used to flounce into when she was a teenager—which seemed to him, in his current state, just weeks ago. "Mom wouldn't have wanted it."

Mac threaded his fingers together, rested his elbows on his thighs and stared at the floor so that his daughter wouldn't see the flash of anger in his eyes. Leta didn't want anything any more. She was dead, and he was alone, with her memories taunting him from a homemade shelf.

"I'll be all right," he said.

"I'm a little worried to leave you here," Cherie said. "Why don't you come to my place for a few days? I'll fix you dinner, you can sleep in the guest room, have a look at the park. We can talk."

He had talked to Cherie. To Cherie, her soon-to-be second husband, her grown son, all of Leta's sisters and cousins, and friends, Lord knew how many friends they'd had. And reporters. Strange that one woman's death, one woman's relatively insignificant life, had drawn so many reporters.

"I want to sleep in my own bed," he said.

"Fine." Cherie stood as if she hadn't heard him. "We'll get you a cab when it's time to come home. Dad—"

"Cherie." He looked up at her, eyes puffy from her own tears, hair slightly mussed. "I won't stop missing her just because I'm at your place. The mourning doesn't go away once the funeral's over."

Her nose got red, as it always had when someone hit a nerve. "I just thought it might be easier, that's all."

Easier for whom, baby? he wanted to ask, but knew better. "I'll be all right," he said again, and left it at that.

The first time travel breakthroughs came slowly. The breakthroughs built on each other, though, and in the early thirties, scientists predicted that human beings would be visiting their own pasts by the end of the decade.

It turns out these scientists were right, but not in the way they expected. Human beings could not interact with time. They could only open a window into the time-space continuum, and make a record—an expensive record—of past events.

Historians valued the opportunity, but no one else did until Susan Yashimoto combined time recordings with virtual reality technology, and holography, added a few augmentations of her own, and began marketing holocordings.

Her first choices were brilliant. By using a list of historic events voted most likely to be visited should a time machine be invented, she created 'cordings of the birth of Christ, Mohammed's triumphal return to Mecca, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and dozens of others.

Soon, other companies entered the fray. Finding their choices limited by copyrights placed on a time period by worried historians afraid of losing their jobs, these companies began opening portals into daily life. . . .

—From *A History of Conversation*
J. Booth Centuri, 2066.
Download Reference Number:
ConverXGC112445 at Library of Congress [loc.org]

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* * *

Mac had lied to Cherie. He would not sleep in his own bed. The bedroom was still filled with Leta—the blue and black bedspread they'd compromised on fifteen years before, the matching but frayed sheets she wanted to die on, the tiny strands of long gray hairs that—no matter how much he cleaned—still covered her favorite pillow.

He'd thrown out her treatment bottles, taken the Kleenex off the nightstand, put the old-fashioned hardcover of *Gulliver's Travels* that she would now never finish on their collectibles bookshelf, but he couldn't get rid of her scent—faintly musky, slightly apricot, and always, no matter how sick she got, making him think of youth.

He carried a blanket and pillow to the couch, as he had for the last six months of Leta's life, pulled down the shade of the large picture window overlooking the George Washington Bridge—the view was the reason he'd taken the apartment in that first week of the new millennium, when he'd been filled with hopes and dreams as yet unspoiled.

He wandered toward the small kitchen for a glass of something—water, beer, he wasn't certain—stopping instead by Leta's shelf and flicking on the light, a small act of rebellion against his own daughter.

The 'cordings glinted again, like diamonds in a jewelry store window, tempting, teasing. He'd walked past this shelf a thousand times, laughed at Leta for her vanity—*sometimes I think you're the only reason the* June Sixteenth at Anna's *'cordings make any money,* he used to say to her—and derided her for attaching so much significance to that one day in her past.

You didn't even think it important until some holographer guy decided it was, he'd say, and she'd nod in acknowledgement.

Sometimes, she said to him once, *we don't know what's important until it's too late.*

He found himself holding the deluxe retrospective edition—six hours long, with the Latest Updates and Innovations!—the only set of *June Sixteenth at Anna's* with both copies still in their wrappers. It had arrived days before Leta died.

He'd carried the package in to her, brought her newest player out, the one he'd bought her that final Christmas, and placed them both on the edge of the bed.

"I'll set you up if you want," he'd said.

She had been leaning against nearly a dozen pillows, a cocoon he'd built for her when he realized that nothing would stop her inevitable march to the end. Her eyes were just slightly glazed as she took his hand.

"I've been there before," she said, her voice raspy and nearly gone.

"But not this one," he said. "You don't know the changes they've made. Maybe they have all five senses this time—"

"Mac," she whispered. "This time, I want to stay here with you."

In New York's second Gilded Age, Anna's was considered the premier spot for conversation. Like the cafes of the French Revolution or Hemingway's Movable Feast, Anna's became a pivotal place to sit, converse, and exchange ideas.

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Director Hiram Goldman remembered Anna's. He applied for a time recording permit, and scanned appropriate days, finally settling on June 16, 2001 for its mix of customers, its wide-ranging conversational high points, and the empty chair that rests against a far wall, allowing the viewer to feel a part of the scene before him. . . .

—liner notes from *June Sixteenth at Anna's,* original edition

Mac had never used a holocording, never saw the need to go back in time, especially to a period he'd already lived through. He'd said so to Leta right from the start, and after she picked up her fifth copy of *June Sixteenth,* she'd stopped asking him to join her.

He always glanced politely at the interviews, nodded at the crowds who gathered at the retrospectives, and never really listened to the speeches or the long, involved discussions of the fans.

Leta collected everything associated with that day, enjoying her minor celebrity, pleased that it had come to her after she had raised Cherie and, Leta would tell him, already had a chance to live a real life.

It was a shame she'd never opened the last 'cording. It was a sign of how ill she had been toward the end. Any other time, she might have read the liner notes—or had the box read them to her—looked at the still holos, and giggled over the inevitable analysis which, she said, was always pretentious and always wrong.

Mac opened the wrapping, felt it crinkle beneath his fingers as he tossed it in the trash. The plastic surface of the case had been engineered to feel like high-end leather. Someone had even added the faint odor of calfskin for verisimilitude.

He opened the case, saw the shiny silver disk on the right side, and all his other choices on the left: analysis at the touch of a finger, in any form he wanted—hard-copy, audio, e-copy (format of his choice), holographic discussion; history of the 'cording; a biography of the participants, including but not limited to what happened to them after June 16, 2001; and half a dozen other things including plug-ins (for an extra charge) that would enhance the experience.

Leta used to spend hours over each piece, reviewing it as if she were going to be quizzed on it, carrying parts of it to him and sharing it with him against his will.

He was no longer certain why he was so against participating. Perhaps because he felt that life moved forward, not backward, and someone else's perspective on the past was as valid as a stranger's opinion of a book no one had ever read.

Or perhaps it was his way of dealing with minor celebrity, being Leta Thayer's husband, having his life scratched and pawed at without ever really being understood.

Mac left the case open on the shelf, next to all the other *June Sixteenth*'s, and stuck his finger through the hole in the center of the silver 'cording, carrying it with him.

The player was still in the hall closet where he'd left it two weeks before. He dragged it out, knocking over one of Leta's boots, still marked by

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last winter's slush, and felt a wave of such sadness he thought he wouldn't be able to stand upright.

He tried anyway, and thought it a small victory that he succeeded.

Then he carried the player and the 'cording into the bedroom, and placed them on the foot of the bed.

Two hundred and fifty people crossed the threshold at Anna's that afternoon, and although they were ethnically and culturally diverse, the sample was too small to provide a representative cross-section of the Manhattan population of that period. The restaurant was too obscure to appeal to the famous, too small to attract people from outside the neighborhood, and too new to have cachet. The appeal of June Sixteenth *is the ordinariness of the patrons, the fact that on June 16, 2001 not one of them is known outside their small circle of friends and family. Their very obscurity raises their conversations to new heights.*

—From *A History of June Sixteenth at Anna's*
Erik Reese, University of Idaho Press, 2051

Maybe it was the trace of her still left in the room. Maybe it was a hedge against the loneliness that threatened to overwhelm him. Maybe it was simply his only way to banish those final images—her skin yellowish and so thin that it revealed the bones in her face, the drool on the side of her mouth, and the complete lack of recognition in her eyes.

Whatever the reason, he put the 'cording in the player, sat the requisite distance from the wireless technology—so new and different when he was young, not even remarked on now—and flicked on the machine.

It didn't take him away as he'd expected it to. Instead it surrounded him in words and pictures and names. He didn't know how to jump past the opening credits, so he sat very still and waited for the actual 'cording to begin.

Because June Sixteenth at Anna's *is a conversation piece, its packagers never wasted their resources on sensual reconstructions. Sound is present and near perfect. Even the rattle of pans in the kitchen resonates in the dining room. The vision is also perfect—colors rich and lifelike, light and shadow so accurate that if you step into the sunlight you can almost feel the heat.*

But almost is the key word here. Except for fundamentals like making certain that solid objects are indeed solid, required of all successful holocordings, June Sixteenth at Anna's *lacks the essentials of a true historical projection. We cannot smell the garlic, the frying meat, the strawberries that look so fresh and ripe on the table nearest our chair.*

Purists claim this is so that we can concentrate on the conversation. But somehow the lack of sensation limits the spoken word. When Rufolio Field lights his illegal cigar three hours into our afternoon and management rebuffs him, we see the offense but do not take it. We are reminded that we are observers—part of the scene, but in no way of the scene.

Once the illusion is shattered, June Sixteenth at Anna's *is reduced to its component parts. It becomes a flat screen documentary remixed for the*

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holocorders, both lifeless and old-fashioned, when what we long for is the kind of attention to detail given to truly historic moments, like The Gettysburg Address (Weekend Edition) *or the newly released* Assassination of Archduke Ferdinand. . . .

—Review of *June Sixteenth at Anna's, Special Six Hour Edition* in *The Essential Holographer*
February 22, 2050

The restaurant comes into view very slowly. Out of the post-credits darkness, he hears laughter, the gentle flow of voices, the clink of silverware. Then pieces appear—the maître d's station, a simple podium flanked by two small indoor trees, the doorway leading into the restaurant proper, the couple—whom he would have termed elderly in 2001—slipping past him toward a table in the back.

Mac stands in the doorway, feeling a sense of déjà vu that would have been ridiculous if it weren't so accurate. He has been here before. Of course. A hundred times before the restaurant closed in 2021. Only he never saw the early décor—the round bistro tables covered with red checked cloths; the padded sweetheart chairs that didn't look comfortable; the floor-to-ceiling windows on the street level, an indulgence that went away only a few months later, shattered by ash and falling debris.

The restaurant is almost full. A busboy removes a sweetheart chair from the table closest to the window, holding the chair by its wire frame. He carries the chair to the wall closest to Mac, sets it down, and nods at the maître d', who leads a young couple into the dining room.

Mac needs no more than the sway of her long black hair to recognize Leta. His heart leaps, and for a moment he thinks: she isn't dead. She's right here, trapped in a temporal loop, and if he frees her, she'll come home again.

Instead, he sits in the empty chair.

A speaker above him plays Charlie Burnet's "Skyliner," a CD from its poor quality, remastereded from the original tapes. Pans rattle in the kitchen, and voices murmur around him, talking about the best place to eat foie gras, the history of graveyards in Manhattan, new ways to celebrate Juneteenth.

He cannot hear Leta. She is all the way across the room from him, several famous conversations away, her hand outstretched as if waiting for him to take it.

He has a good view of her face, illuminated by the thin light filtering through the windows—the canyons of the city blocking any real sun. She is smiling, nodding at something her companion says, her eyes twinkling in that way she had when she thought everything she heard was bullshit but she was too polite to say so.

Mac hadn't known her when she was here—they met in October, during that seemingly endless round of funerals, and he remembered telling her he felt guilty for feeling that spark of attraction, for beginning something new when everything else was ending.

She had put her hand on his, the skin on her palms dry and rough from all the assistance she'd been giving friends: dishes, packing, childcare. Her eyes had had shadows so deep he could barely see their shape. It

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wasn't until their second date that he realized her eyes had a slightly almond cast, and they were an impossible shade of blue.

There are no shadows under her eyes here, in Anna's. Leta is smiling, looking incredibly young. Mac never knew her this young, this carefree. Her skin has no lines, and that single white strand that appeared above her right temple—the one she'd plucked on their first date and looked at in horror—isn't visible at all.

She wears a white summer dress that accents her sun-darkened skin, and as she talks, she takes a white sweater from the suitcase she used to call a purse. He recognizes the shudder, the gestures, as she puts the sweater over her shoulders.

She is clearly complaining about the cold, about air conditioning he cannot feel. The air here is the same as the air in his bedroom, a little too warm. So much is missing, things his memory is supplying—the garlic and wine scent of Anna's, the mixture of perfumes that always seemed to linger in front of the door. He isn't hungry, and he should be. He always got hungry after a few moments in here, the rich fragrances of spiced pork in red sauce and beef sautéed in garlic and wine—Anna's specialties—making him wish that the restaurant hurried its service instead of priding itself on its European pace.

But Anna's had been a favorite of Leta's long before Mac ate there. She had been the one who showed it to him, at the grand re-opening that December, filled with survivors and firefighters and local heroes, all trying to celebrate a Christmas that had more melancholy than joy.

Six months away for this Leta. Six months and an entire lifetime away.

A waiter walks past with a full tray—polenta with a mushroom sauce, several side dishes of pasta, and breadsticks so warm their steam floats past Mac. He cannot smell them, although he wants to. He reaches for one and his fingers find bread so hard and crusty it feels stale. He cannot pull the breadstick off, of course. This is a construct, a group memory—the solidity added to make the scene feel real.

He's not confined to the chair—he knows that much about 'cordings. He can walk from table to table, listen to each conversation, maybe even go into the kitchen, depending on how deluxe this edition is.

He is not tempted to move around. He wants to stay here, where he can see the young woman who would someday become his wife flirting with a man whom she decides, one week later, to never see again after he gives her the only black eye she will ever have.

One of the many stories, she used to say, that never made it into the analysis.

Leta tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, laughs, sips some white wine. Mac watches her, enthralled. There is a carefreeness to her he has never seen before, a lightness that had vanished by the time he met her.

He isn't sure he would be interested in this Leta. She has beauty and style, but the substance, the caring that so touched him the day of his uncle's funeral, isn't present at all.

Maybe the substance is in the conversation. The famous conversation. After a moment's hesitation, he decides to listen after all.

* * *

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June Sixteenth at Anna's *has often been compared with jazz—the lively, free-flowing jazz of the 1950s and 60s, recorded on vinyl with all the scratches and nicks, recorded live so that each cough and smattering of early applause adds to the sense of a past so close that it's almost tangible.*

Yet June Sixteenth at Anna's *has more than that. It has community, a feeling that all the observer has to do is pull his chair to the closest table, and he will belong.*

Perhaps it is the setting—very few holocordings take place in restaurants because of the ambient noise—or perhaps it is the palpable sense of enjoyment, the feeling that everyone in the room participates fully in their lives, leaving no moment unobserved. . . .

— "The Longevity of *June Sixteenth at Anna's,*"
by Michael Meller, first given as a speech
at the June Sixteenth Retrospective held
at the Museum of Conversational Arts
June 16, 2076

The cheap CD is playing "Sentimental Journey," Doris Day's melancholy voice at odds with the laughter in this well-lit place. Mac walks past table after table, bumping one. The water glasses do not shake, the table doesn't even move, and although he reflexively apologizes, no one hears him.

He feels like a ghost in a room full of strangers.

The conversations float around him, intense, serious, sincere. He's not sure what makes these discussions famous. Is it the unintentional irony of incorrect predictions, like the group of businessmen discussing October's annual stock market decline? Or the poignancy of plans that would never come about, lives with less than three months left, all the obvious changes ahead?

He does not know. The conversations don't seem special to him. They seem like regular discussions, the kind people still have in restaurants all over the city. Perhaps that's the appeal, the link that sends the conversation collector from the present to the past.

His link still sits at her table, flipping her hair off her shoulder with a casual gesture. As he gets closer, he can almost smell her perfume. Right about now she should acknowledge him, that small turn in his direction, the slight raise of her eyebrows, the secret smile that they'd shared from the first instant they'd met.

But she doesn't turn. She doesn't see him. Instead, she's discussing the importance of heroes with a man who has no idea what heroism truly is.

Her fingers tap nervously against the table, a sign—a week before she throws Frank Dannen out of her life—that she doesn't like him at all. It always took time for Leta's brain to acknowledge her emotions. Too bad she hadn't realized before he hit her that Frank wasn't the man for her.

Mac stops next to the table, glances once at Frank. This is the first time Mac has seen the man outside of photographs. Curly black hair, a strong jaw, the thick neck of a former football player which, of course, he was. Frank died long before the first *June Sixteenth at Anna's* appeared, in a bar fight fifteen years after this meal.

Mac remembers because Leta showed him the story in the *Daily News,*

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and said with no pity in her voice, *I always knew he would come to a bad end.*

But here, in this timeless place, Frank is alive and handsome in a way that glosses over the details: the way his lower lip sets in a hard line, the bruised knuckles on his right hand, which he keeps carefully hidden from Leta, the two bottles of beer that have disappeared in the short forty-five minutes they've been at the table. Frank is barely listening to Leta; instead he checks out the other women in the room, short glances that are imperceptible to anyone who isn't paying attention.

Mac is, but he has wasted enough time on this man. Instead Mac stares at the woman who would become his wife. She stops speaking midthought, and leans back in her chair. Mac smiles, recognizing this ploy.

He can predict her next words: *Do you want me to continue talking to myself or would you prefer the radio for background noise?*

But she says nothing, merely watches Frank with a quizzical expression on her face, one that looks—to someone who doesn't know her—like affection, but is really a test to see when Frank will notice that she's done.

He doesn't, at least not while Mac is watching. Leta sighs, picks at the green salad before her, then glances out the window. Mac glances too, but sees nothing. Whoever recorded this scene, whoever touched it up, hadn't bothered with the outdoors, only with the restaurant and the small dramas occurring inside it.

Dramas whose endings were already known.

Because he can't help himself, Mac touches her shoulder. The flesh is warm and soft to the touch, but it is not Leta's flesh. It feels like someone else's. Leta's skin had a satiny quality that remained with her during her whole life. First, the expense of new satin, and later, the comforting patina of old satin, showing how much it was loved.

She does not look at him, and he pulls his hand away. Leta always looked at him when he touched her, always acknowledged their connection, their bond—sometimes with annoyance, when she was too busy to focus on it, yet always with love.

This isn't his Leta. This is a mannequin in a wax works, animated to go through its small part for someone else's amusement.

Mac can't take any more. He stands up, says, "Voice command: stop."

And the restaurant fades to blackness a piece at a time—the tables and patrons first, then the ambient noise, and finally the voices, fading, fading, until their words are nothing but a memory of whispers in the dark.

June Sixteenth at Anna's *should not be a famous conversation piece. The fact that it is says more about our generation's search for meaning than it does about June 16, 2001.*

We believe that our grandparents lived fuller lives because they endured so much more. Yet all that June Sixteenth at Anna's *shows us is that each life is filled with countless moments, memorable and unmemorable—and the only meaning that these moments have are the meanings with which we imbue them at various points in our lives.*

—From *June Sixteenth at Anna's Revisited,*
Mia Oppel, Harvard University Press, 2071.

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Mac ended up standing beside the bed, only a foot from the player. The 'cording whirred as it wound down, the sound aggressive, as if resenting being shut off mid-program, before all the conversations had been played.

The scent of Leta lingered, and Mac realized that it had been the only real thing in his entire trip. The scent and the temperature of his bedroom had accompanied him into Anna's, bringing even more of the present into his glimpse of the past.

He took the 'cording out of the player, and carried it to the living room, placing the silver disk in its expensive case. Then he returned to the bedroom, put the player away, and lay down on the bed for the first time since Leta had left it, almost a week ago.

If he closed his eyes, he could imagine her warmth, the way he used to roll into it mornings after she had gotten up. It was like being cradled in her arms, and often he would fall back to sleep until she would wake him in exasperation, reminding him that he had a job just like everyone else on the planet and it was time he went off to do it.

But the bed wasn't really warm, and if he fell asleep, she wasn't going to wake him, not now, not ever. The 'cording had left him feeling hollow, almost as if he'd done something dirty, forbidden, seeking out his wife where he knew she couldn't have been.

He had no idea why she watched all of the *June Sixteenths*. Read the commentary, yes, he understood that. And he understood the interviews, the way she accepted a fan's fawning over something she never got paid for, never even got acknowledged for. Some of the *June Sixteenth* participants sued for their percentage of the profits—and lost, since 'cordings were as much about packaging as the historical moment—but Leta had never joined them.

Instead, she went back to that single day in her life over and over again, watching her younger self from the outside, seeing—what? Looking for—what?

It certainly wasn't Frank. Mac knew her well enough for that. Had she been looking for a kind of perspective on herself, on her life? Or trying to figure out, perhaps, what her world would have been like if she had made different choices, tried other things?

He didn't know. And now, he would never know. He had teased her, listened to her talk about the ancillary materials, even bought her the latest copies of *June Sixteenth,* but he had never once heard her speak about the experience of walking around as an outsider in her own past.

A mystery of Leta—like all the other mysteries of Leta, including but not limited to why she had loved him—would remain forever unsolved.

He couldn't find the answers in *June Sixteenth,* just as he couldn't find Leta there. All that remained of Leta were bits and pieces—a scent, slowly fading; a voice, half remembered; the brush of her skin against his own.

Leta's life had an ending now, her existence as finite as *June Sixteenth at Anna's,* her essence as impossible to reproduce.

Mac hugged her favorite pillow to himself. Leta would never reappear again—not whole, breathing, surprising him with her depth.

The realization had finally come home to him, and settled in his heart: She was gone, and all he had left of her were her ghosts. O

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LEGIONS IN TIME

Michael Swanwick

The paperback edition of Michael Swanwick's popular novel, *Bones of the Earth,* is just out from Eos. It is based on the Hugo-award-winning story, "Scherzo with Tyrannosaur," which first appeared in our July 1999 issue.

Eleanor Voigt had the oddest job of anyone she knew. She worked eight hours a day in an office where no business was done. Her job was to sit at a desk and stare at the closet door. There was a button on the desk that she was to push if anybody came out that door. There was a big clock on the wall, and, precisely at noon, once a day, she went over to the door and unlocked it with a key she had been given. Inside was an empty closet. There were no trap doors or secret panels in it—she had looked. It was just an empty closet.

If she noticed anything unusual, she was supposed to go back to her desk and press the button.

"Unusual in what way?" she'd asked when she'd been hired. "I don't understand. What am I looking for?"

"You'll know it when you see it," Mr. Tarblecko had said in that odd accent of his. Mr. Tarblecko was her employer, and some kind of foreigner. He was the creepiest thing imaginable. He had pasty white skin and no hair at all on his head, so that when he took his hat off, he looked like some species of mushroom. His ears were small and almost pointed. Ellie thought he might have some kind of disease. But he paid two dollars an hour, which was good money nowadays for a woman of her age.

At the end of her shift, she was relieved by an unkempt young man who had once blurted out to her that he was a poet. When she came in, in the morning, a heavy Negress would stand up wordlessly, take her coat and hat from the rack, and, with enormous dignity, leave.

So all day Ellie sat behind the desk with nothing to do. She wasn't allowed to read a book, for fear she might get so involved in it that she would stop watching the door. Crosswords were allowed, because they weren't as engrossing. She got a lot of knitting done, and was considering taking up tatting.

Over time, the door began to loom large in her imagination. She pictured herself unlocking it at some forbidden not-noon time and seeing—

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what? Her imagination failed her. No matter how vividly she visualized it, the door would open onto something mundane. Brooms and mops. Sports equipment. Galoshes and old clothes. What else would there be in a closet? What else *could* there be?

Sometimes, caught up in her imaginings, she would find herself on her feet. Sometimes, she walked to the door. Once, she actually put her hand on the knob before drawing away. But always the thought of losing her job stopped her.

It was maddening.

Twice, Mr. Tarblecko had come to the office while she was on duty. Each time, he was wearing that same black suit with that same narrow black tie. "You have a watch?" he'd asked.

"Yes, sir." The first time, she'd held forth her wrist to show it to him. The disdainful way he ignored the gesture ensured she did not repeat it on his second visit.

"Go away. Come back in forty minutes."

So she had gone out to a little tearoom nearby. She had a bag lunch back in her desk, with a baloney-and-mayonnaise sandwich and an apple, but she'd been so flustered she'd forgotten it, and then feared to go back after it. She'd treated herself to a dainty "lady lunch" that she was in no mood to appreciate, left a dime tip for the waitress, and was back in front of the office door exactly thirty-eight minutes after she'd left.

At forty minutes, exactly, she reached for the door.

As if he'd been waiting for her to do so, Mr. Tarblecko breezed through the door, putting on his hat. He didn't acknowledge her promptness *or* her presence. He just strode briskly past, as though she didn't exist.

Stunned, she went inside, closed the door, and returned to her desk.

She realized then that Mr. Tarblecko was genuinely, fabulously rich. He had the arrogance of those who are so wealthy that they inevitably get their way in all small matters because there's always somebody there to *arrange* things that way. His type was never grateful for anything and never bothered to be polite, because it never even occurred to them that things could be otherwise.

The more she thought about it, the madder she got. She was no Bolshevik, but it seemed to her that people had certain rights, and that one of these was the right to a little common courtesy. It diminished one to be treated like a stick of furniture. It was degrading. She was damned if she was going to take it.

Six months went by.

The door opened and Mr. Tarblecko strode in, as if he'd left only minutes ago. "You have a watch?"

Ellie slid open a drawer and dropped her knitting into it. She opened another and took out her bag lunch. "Yes."

"Go away. Come back in forty minutes."

So she went outside. It was May, and Central Park was only a short walk away, so she ate there, by the little pond where children floated their toy sailboats. But all the while she fumed. She was a good employee—she really was! She was conscientious, punctual, and she never called in sick.

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Mr. Tarblecko ought to appreciate that. He had no business treating her the way he did.

Almost, she wanted to overstay lunch, but her conscience wouldn't allow that. When she got back to the office, precisely thirty-nine and a half minutes after she'd left, she planted herself squarely in front of the door so that when Mr. Tarblecko left he would have no choice but to confront her. It might well lose her her job, but . . . well, if it did, it did. That's how strongly she felt about it.

Thirty seconds later, the door opened and Mr. Tarblecko strode briskly out. Without breaking his stride, or, indeed, showing the least sign of emotion, he picked her up by her two arms, swiveled effortlessly, and deposited her to the side.

Then he was gone. Ellie heard his footsteps dwindling down the hall.

The nerve! The sheer, raw *gall* of the man!

Ellie went back in the office, but she couldn't make herself sit down at the desk. She was far too upset. Instead, she walked back and forth the length of the room, arguing with herself, saying aloud those things she should have said and would have said if only Mr. Tarblecko had stood still for them. To be picked up and set aside like that . . . well, it was really quite upsetting. It was intolerable.

What was particularly distressing was that there wasn't even any way to make her displeasure known.

At last, though, she calmed down enough to think clearly, and realized that she was wrong. There *was* something—something more symbolic than substantive, admittedly—that she could do.

She could open that door.

Ellie did not act on impulse. She was a methodical woman. So she thought the matter through before she did anything. Mr. Tarblecko very rarely showed up at the office—only twice in all the time she'd been here, and she'd been here over a year. Moreover, the odds of him returning to the office a third time only minutes after leaving it were negligible. He had left nothing behind—she could see that at a glance; the office was almost Spartan in its emptiness. Nor was there any work here for him to return to.

Just to be safe, though, she locked the office door. Then she got her chair out from behind the desk and chocked it up under the doorknob, so that even if somebody had a key, he couldn't get in. She put her ear to the door and listened for noises in the hall.

Nothing.

It was strange how, now that she had decided to do the deed, time seemed to slow and the office to expand. It took forever to cross the vast expanses of empty space between her and the closet door. Her hand reaching for its knob pushed through air as thick as molasses. Her fingers closed about it, one by one, and in the time it took for them to do so, there was room enough for a hundred second thoughts. Faintly, she heard the sound of . . . machinery? A low humming noise.

She placed the key in the lock, and opened the door.

There stood Mr. Tarblecko.

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Ellie shrieked, and staggered backward. One of her heels hit the floor wrong, and her ankle twisted, and she almost fell. Her heart was hammering so furiously her chest hurt.

Mr. Tarblecko glared at her from within the closet. His face was as white as a sheet of paper. "One rule," he said coldly, tonelessly. "You had only one rule, and you broke it." He stepped out. "You are a very bad slave."

"I . . . I . . . I . . ." Ellie found herself gasping from the shock. "I'm not a slave at all!"

"There is where you are wrong, Eleanor Voigt. There is where you are very wrong indeed," said Mr. Tarblecko. "Open the window."

Ellie went to the window and pulled up the blinds. There was a little cactus in a pot on the windowsill. She moved it to her desk. Then she opened the window. It stuck a little, so she had to put all her strength into it. The lower sash went up slowly at first and then, with a rush, slammed to the top. A light, fresh breeze touched her.

"Climb onto the windowsill."

"I most certainly will—" *not,* she was going to say. But to her complete astonishment, she found herself climbing up onto the sill. She could not help herself. It was as if her will were not her own.

"Sit down with your feet outside the window."

It was like a hideous nightmare, the kind that you know can't be real and struggle to awaken from, but cannot. Her body did exactly as it was told to do. She had absolutely no control over it.

"Do not jump until I tell you to do so."

"Are you going to tell me to jump?" she asked quaveringly. "Oh, *please,* Mr. Tarblecko . . ."

"Now look down."

The office was on the ninth floor. Ellie was a lifelong New Yorker, so that had never seemed to her a particularly great height before. Now it did. The people on the sidewalk were as small as ants. The buses and automobiles on the street were the size of matchboxes. The sounds of horns and engines drifted up to her, and birdsong as well, the lazy background noises of a spring day in the city. The ground was so terribly far away! And there was nothing between her and it but air! Nothing holding her back from death but her fingers desperately clutching the window frame!

Ellie could feel all the world's gravity willing her toward the distant concrete. She was dizzy with vertigo and a sick, stomach-tugging urge to simply let go and, briefly, fly. She squeezed her eyes shut tight, and felt hot tears streaming down her face.

She could tell from Mr. Tarblecko's voice that he was standing right behind her. "If I told you to jump, Eleanor Voigt, would you do so?"

"Yes," she squeaked.

"What kind of person jumps to her death simply because she's been told to do so?"

"A . . . a slave!"

"Then what are you?"

"A slave! A slave! I'm a slave!" She was weeping openly now, as much from humiliation as from fear. "I don't want to die! I'll be your slave, anything, whatever you say!"

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"If you're a slave, then what kind of slave should you be?"

"A . . . a . . . *good* slave."

"Come back inside."

Gratefully, she twisted around, and climbed back into the office. Her knees buckled when she tried to stand, and she had to grab at the windowsill to keep from falling. Mr. Tarblecko stared at her, sternly and steadily.

"You have been given your only warning," he said. "If you disobey again—or if you ever try to quit—I will order you out the window."

He walked into the closet and closed the door behind him.

There were two hours left on her shift—time enough, barely, to compose herself. When the disheveled young poet showed up, she dropped her key in her purse and walked past him without so much as a glance. Then she went straight to the nearest hotel bar, and ordered a gin and tonic.

She had a lot of thinking to do.

Eleanor Voigt was not without resources. She had been an executive secretary before meeting her late husband, and everyone knew that a good executive secretary effectively runs her boss's business for him. Before the Crash, she had run a household with three servants. She had entertained. Some of her parties had required weeks of planning and preparation. If it weren't for the Depression, she was sure she'd be in a much better-paid position than the one she held.

She was *not* going to be a slave.

But before she could find a way out of her predicament, she had to understand it. First, the closet. Mr. Tarblecko had left the office and then, minutes later, popped up inside it. A hidden passage of some kind? No—that was simultaneously too complicated and not complicated enough. She had heard machinery, just before she opened the door. So . . . some kind of transportation device, then. Something that a day ago she would have sworn couldn't exist. A teleporter, perhaps, or a time machine.

The more she thought of it, the better she liked the thought of the time machine. It was not just that teleporters were the stuff of Sunday funnies and Buck Rogers serials, while *The Time Machine* was a distinguished philosophical work by Mr. H.G. Wells. Though she had to admit that figured in there. But a teleportation device required a twin somewhere, and Mr. Tarblecko hadn't had the time even to leave the building.

A time machine, however, would explain so much! Her employer's long absences. The necessity that the device be watched when not in use, lest it be employed by Someone Else. Mr. Tarblecko's abrupt appearance today, and his possession of a coercive power that no human being on Earth had.

The fact that she could no longer think of Mr. Tarblecko as human.

She had barely touched her drink, but now she found herself too impatient to finish it. She slapped a dollar bill down on the bar and, without waiting for her change, left.

During the time it took to walk the block and a half to the office building and ride the elevator up to the ninth floor, Ellie made her plans. She strode briskly down the hallway and opened the door without knocking.

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The unkempt young man looked up, startled, from a scribbled sheet of paper.

"You have a watch?"

"Y-yes, but . . . Mr. Tarblecko . . ."

"Get out. Come back in forty minutes."

With grim satisfaction, she watched the young man cram his key into one pocket and the sheet of paper into another and leave. *Good slave,* she thought to herself. Perhaps he'd already been through the little charade Mr. Tarblecko had just played on her. Doubtless every employee underwent ritual enslavement as a way of keeping them in line. The problem with having slaves, however, was that they couldn't be expected to display any initiative. . . . Not on the master's behalf, anyway.

Ellie opened her purse and got out the key. She walked to the closet.

For an instant, she hesitated. Was she really sure enough to risk her life? But the logic was unassailable. She had been given no second chance. If Mr. Tarblecko *knew* she was about to open the door a second time, he would simply have ordered her out the window on her first offense. The fact that he hadn't meant that he didn't know.

She took a deep breath and opened the door.

There was a world inside.

For what seemed like forever, Ellie stood staring at the bleak metropolis so completely unlike New York City. Its buildings were taller than any she had ever seen—miles high!—and interlaced with skywalks, like those in *Metropolis*. But the buildings in the movie had been breathtaking, and these were the opposite of beautiful. They were ugly as sin: windowless, grey, stained, and discolored. There were monotonous lines of harsh lights along every street, and under their glare trudged men and women as uniform and lifeless as robots. Outside the office, it was a beautiful bright day. But on the other side of the closet, the world was dark as night.

And it was snowing.

Gingerly, she stepped into the closet. The instant her foot touched the floor, it seemed to expand to all sides. She stood at the center of a great wheel of doors, with all but two of them—to her office and to the winter world—shut. There were hooks beside each door, and hanging from them were costumes of a hundred different cultures. She thought she recognized togas, Victorian opera dress, kimonos. . . . But most of the clothing was unfamiliar.

Beside the door into winter, there was a long cape. Ellie wrapped it around herself, and discovered a knob on the inside. She twisted it to the right, and suddenly the coat was hot as hot. Quickly, she twisted the knob to the left, and it grew cold. She fiddled with the thing until the cape felt just right. Then she straightened her shoulders, took a deep breath, and stepped out into the forbidding city.

There was a slight electric sizzle, and she was standing in the street.

Ellie spun around to see what was behind her: a rectangle of some glassy black material. She rapped it with her knuckles. It was solid. But when she brought her key near its surface, it shimmered and opened into that strange space between worlds again.

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So she had a way back home.

To either side of her rectangle were identical glassy rectangles faceted slightly away from it. They were the exterior of an enormous kiosk, or perhaps a very low building, at the center of a large, featureless square. She walked all the way around it, rapping each rectangle with her key. Only the one would open for her.

The first thing to do was to find out where—or, rather, *when*—she was. Ellie stepped in front of one of the hunched, slow-walking men. "Excuse me, sir, could you answer a few questions for me?"

The man raised a face that was utterly bleak and without hope. A ring of grey metal glinted from his neck. "Hawrzat dagtiknut?" he asked.

Ellie stepped back in horror, and, like a wind-up toy temporarily halted by a hand or a foot, the man resumed his plodding gait.

She cursed herself. Of *course* language would have changed in the however-many-centuries future she found herself in. Well . . . that was going to make gathering information more difficult. But she was used to difficult tasks. The evening of James's suicide, she had been the one to clean the walls and the floor. After that, she'd known that she was capable of doing anything she set her mind to.

Above all, it was important that she not get lost. She scanned the square with the doorways in time at its center—mentally, she dubbed it Times Square—and chose at random one of the broad avenues converging on it. That, she decided would be Broadway.

Ellie started down Broadway, watching everybody and everything. Some of the drone-folk were dragging sledges with complex machinery on them. Others were hunched under soft translucent bags filled with murky fluid and vague biomorphic shapes. The air smelled bad, but in ways she was not familiar with.

She had gotten perhaps three blocks when the sirens went off—great piercing blasts of noise that assailed the ears and echoed from the building walls. All the streetlights flashed off and on and off again in a one-two rhythm. From unseen loudspeakers, an authoritative voice blared, *"Akgang! Akgang! Kronzvarbrakar! Zawzawkstrag! Akgang! Akgang. . . ."*

Without hurry, the people in the street began turning away, touching their hands to dull grey plates beside nondescript doors and disappearing into the buildings.

"Oh, cripes!" Ellie muttered. She'd best—

There was a disturbance behind her. Ellie turned and saw the strangest thing yet.

It was a girl of eighteen or nineteen, wearing summer clothes—a man's trousers, a short-sleeved flower-print blouse—and she was running down the street in a panic. She grabbed at the uncaring drones, begging for help. "Please!" she cried. "Can't you help me? Somebody! Please . . . you have to help me!" Puffs of steam came from her mouth with each breath. Once or twice she made a sudden dart for one of the doorways and slapped her hand on the greasy plates. But the doors would not open for her.

Now the girl had reached Ellie. In a voice that expected nothing, she said, "Please?"

"I'll help you, dear," Ellie said.

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The girl shrieked, then convulsively hugged her. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you," she babbled.

"Follow close behind me." Ellie strode up behind one of the lifeless unmen and, just after he had slapped his hand on the plate, but before he could enter, grabbed his rough tunic and gave it a yank. He turned.

"Vamoose!" she said in her sternest voice, and jerked a thumb over her shoulder.

The un-man turned away. He might not understand the word, but the tone and the gesture sufficed.

Ellie stepped inside, pulling the girl after her. The door closed behind them.

"Wow," said the girl wonderingly. "How did you do that?"

"This is a slave culture. For a slave to survive, he's got to obey anyone who acts like a master. It's that simple. Now, what's your name and how did you get here?" As she spoke, Ellie took in her surroundings. The room they were in was dim, grimy—and vast. So far as she could see, there were no interior walls, only the occasional pillar, and, here and there, a set of functional metal stairs without railings.

"Nadine Shepard. I . . . I . . . There was a door! And I walked through it and I found myself *here!* I . . ."

The child was close to hysteria. "I know, dear. Tell me, when are you from?"

"Chicago. On the North Side, near . . ."

"Not where, dear, when? What year is it?"

"Uh . . . two thousand and four. Isn't it?"

"Not here. Not now." The grey people were everywhere, moving sluggishly, yet always keeping within sets of yellow lines painted on the concrete floor. Their smell was pervasive, and far from pleasant. Still . . .

Ellie stepped directly into the path of one of the sad creatures, a woman. When she stopped, Ellie took the tunic from her shoulders and then stepped back. Without so much as an expression of annoyance, the woman resumed her plodding walk.

"Here you are." She handed the tunic to young Nadine. "Put this on, dear, you must be freezing. Your skin is positively blue." And, indeed, it was not much warmer inside than it had been outdoors. "I'm Eleanor Voigt. Mrs. James Voigt."

Shivering, Nadine donned the rough garment. But instead of thanking Ellie, she said, "You look familiar."

Ellie returned her gaze. She was a pretty enough creature though, strangely, she wore no makeup at all. Her features were regular, intelligent—"You look familiar too. I can't quite put my finger on it, but . . ."

"Okay," Nadine said, "now tell me. Please. Where and when am I, and what's going on?"

"I honestly don't know," Ellie said. Dimly, through the walls, she could hear the sirens and the loudspeaker-voice. If only it weren't so murky in here! She couldn't get any clear idea of the building's layout or function.

"But you *must* know! You're so . . . so capable, so in control. You . . ."

"I'm a castaway like you, dear. Just figuring things out as I go along." She continued to peer. "But I can tell you this much: We are far, far in the

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future. The poor degraded beings you saw on the street are the slaves of a superior race—let's call them the Aftermen. The Aftermen are very cruel, and they can travel through time as easily as you or I can travel from city to city via inter-urban rail. And that's all I know. So far."

Nadine was peering out a little slot in the door that Ellie hadn't noticed. Now she said, "What's this?"

Ellie took her place at the slot, and saw a great bulbous street-filling machine pull to a halt a block from the building. Insectoid creatures that might be robots or might be men in body armor poured out of it, and swarmed down the street, examining every door. The sirens and the loudspeakers cut off. The streetlights returned to normal. "It's time we left," Ellie said.

An enormous artificial voice shook the building. *Akbang! Akbang! Zawzawksbild! Alzowt! Zawzawksbild! Akbang!*

"Quickly!"

She seized Nadine's hand, and they were running.

Without emotion, the grey folk turned from their prior courses and unhurriedly made for the exits.

Ellie and Nadine tried to stay off the walkways entirely. But the air began to tingle, more on the side away from the walkways than the side toward, and then to burn and then to sting. They were quickly forced between the yellow lines. At first they were able to push their way past the drones, and then to shoulder their way through their numbers. But more and more came dead-stepping their way down the metal stairways. More and more descended from the upper levels via lifts that abruptly descended from the ceiling to disgorge them by the hundreds. More and more flowed outward from the building's dim interior.

Passage against the current of flesh became first difficult, and then impossible. They were swept backward, helpless as corks in a rain-swollen river. Outward they were forced and through the exit into the street.

The "police" were waiting there.

At the sight of Ellie and Nadine—they could not have been difficult to discern among the uniform drabness of the others—two of the armored figures stepped forward with long poles and brought them down on the women.

Ellie raised her arm to block the pole, and it landed solidly on her wrist.

Horrid, searing pain shot through her, greater than anything she had ever experienced before. For a giddy instant, Ellie felt a strange elevated sense of being, and she thought, *If I can put up with this, I can endure anything.* Then the world went away.

Ellie came to in a jail cell.

At least, that's what she thought it was. The room was small, square, and doorless. A featureless ceiling gave off a drab, even light. A bench ran around the perimeter, and there was a hole in the middle of the room whose stench advertised its purpose.

She sat up.

On the bench across from her, Nadine was weeping silently into her hands.

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So her brave little adventure had ended. She had rebelled against Mr. Tarblecko's tyranny and come to the same end that awaited most rebels. It was her own foolish fault. She had acted without sufficient forethought, without adequate planning, without scouting out the opposition and gathering information first. She had gone up against a Power that could range effortlessly across time and space, armed only with a pocket handkerchief and a spare set of glasses, and inevitably that Power had swatted her down with a contemptuous minimum of their awesome force.

They hadn't even bothered to take away her purse.

Ellie dug through it, found a cellophane-wrapped hard candy, and popped it into her mouth. She sucked on it joylessly. All hope whatsoever was gone from her.

Still, even when one has no hope, one's obligations remain. "Are you all right, Nadine?" she forced herself to ask. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Nadine lifted her tear-stained face. "I just went through a door," she said. "That's all. I didn't do anything bad or wrong or . . . or anything. And now I'm here!" Fury blazed up in her. "Damn you, damn you, damn you!"

"Me?" Ellie said, astonished.

"You! You shouldn't have let them get us. You should've taken us to some hiding place, and then gotten us back home. But you didn't. You're a stupid, useless old woman!"

It was all Ellie could do to keep from smacking the young lady. But Nadine was practically a child, she told herself, and it didn't seem as if they raised girls to have much gumption in the year 2004. They were probably weak and spoiled people, up there in the twenty-first century, who had robots to do all their work for them, and nothing to do but sit around and listen to the radio all day. So she held not only her hand, but her tongue. "Don't worry, dear," she said soothingly. "We'll get out of this. Somehow."

Nadine stared at her bleakly, disbelievingly. "*How?*" she demanded.

But to this Ellie had no answer.

Time passed. Hours, by Ellie's estimation, and perhaps many hours. And with its passage, she found herself, more out of boredom than from the belief that it would be of any use whatsoever, looking at the situation analytically again.

How had the Aftermen tracked her down?

Some sort of device on the time-door might perhaps warn them that an unauthorized person had passed through. But the "police" had located her so swiftly and surely! They had clearly known exactly where she was. Their machine had come straight toward the building they'd entered. The floods of non-men had flushed her right out into their arms.

So it was something about her, or *on* her, that had brought the Aftermen so quickly.

Ellie looked at her purse with new suspicion. She dumped its contents on the ledge beside her, and pawed through them, looking for the guilty culprit. A few hard candies, a lace hankie, half a pack of cigarettes, fountain pen, glasses case, bottle of aspirin, house key . . . and the key to the

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time closet. The only thing in all she owned that had come to her direct from Mr. Tarblecko. She snatched it up.

It looked ordinary enough. Ellie rubbed it, sniffed it, touched it gently to her tongue.

It tasted sour.

Sour, the way a small battery tasted if you touched your tongue to it. There was a faint trickle of electricity coming from the thing. It was clearly no ordinary key.

She pushed her glasses up on her forehead, held the thing to her eye, and squinted. It looked exactly like a common everyday key. Almost. It had no manufacturer's name on it, and that was unexpected, given that the key looked new and unworn. The top part of it was covered with irregular geometric decorations.

Or *were* they decorations?

She looked up to see Nadine studying her steadily, unblinkingly, like a cat. "Nadine, honey, your eyes are younger than mine—would you take a look at this? Are those tiny . . . *switches* on this thing?"

"What?" Nadine accepted the key from her, examined it, poked at it with one nail.

Flash.

When Ellie stopped blinking and could see again, one wall of their cell had disappeared.

Nadine stepped to the very edge of the cell, peering outward. A cold wind whipped bitter flakes of snow about her. "Look!" she cried. Then, when Ellie stood beside her to see what she saw, Nadine wrapped her arms about the older woman and stepped out into the abyss.

Ellie screamed.

The two women piloted the police vehicle up Broadway, toward Times Square. Though a multiplicity of instruments surrounded the windshield, the controls were simplicity itself: a single stick that, when pushed forward, accelerated the vehicle, and, when pushed to either side, turned it. Apparently, the police did not need to be particularly smart. Neither the steering mechanism nor the doors had any locks on them, so far as Ellie could tell. Apparently, the drone-men had so little initiative that locks weren't required. Which would help explain how she and Nadine had escaped so easily.

"How did you know this vehicle was beneath us?" Ellie asked. "How did you know we'd be able to drive it? I almost had a heart attack when you pushed me out on top of it."

"Way rad, wasn't it? Straight out of a Hong Kong video." Nadine grinned. "Just call me Michelle Yeoh."

"If you say so." She was beginning to rethink her hasty judgment of the lass. Apparently the people of 2004 weren't quite the shrinking violets she'd made them out to be.

With a flicker and a hum, a square sheet of glass below the windshield came to life. Little white dots of light danced, jittered, and coalesced to form a face.

It was Mr. Tarblecko.

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"*Time criminals of the Dawn Era,*" his voice thundered from a hidden speaker. "*Listen and obey.*"

Ellie shrieked, and threw her purse over the visi-plate. "Don't listen to him!" she ordered Nadine. "See if you can find a way of turning this thing off!"

"*Bring the stolen vehicle to a complete halt immediately!*"

To her horror, if not her surprise, Ellie found herself pulling the steering-bar back, slowing the police car to a stop. But then Nadine, in blind obedience to Mr. Tarblecko's compulsive voice, grabbed for the bar as well. Simultaneously, she stumbled, and, with a little *eep* noise, lurched against the bar, pushing it sideways.

The vehicle slewed to one side, smashed into a building wall, and toppled over.

Then Nadine had the roof-hatch open and was pulling her through it. "C'mon!" she shouted. "I can see the black doorway-thingie—the, you know, place!"

Following, Ellie had to wonder about the educational standards of the year 2004. The young lady didn't seem to have a very firm grasp on the English language.

Then they had reached Times Square and the circle of doorways at its center. The street lights were flashing and loudspeakers were shouting "*Akbang! Akbang!*" and police vehicles were converging upon them from every direction, but there was still time. Ellie tapped the nearest doorway with her key. Nothing. The next. Nothing. Then she was running around the building, scraping the key against each doorway, and . . . there it was!

She seized Nadine's hand, and they plunged through.

The space inside expanded in a great wheel to all sides. Ellie spun about. There were doors everywhere—and all of them closed. She had not the faintest idea which one led back to her own New York City.

Wait, though! There were costumes appropriate to each time hanging by their doors. If she just went down them until she found a business suit . . .

Nadine gripped her arm. "Oh, my God!"

Ellie turned, looked, saw. A doorway—the one they had come through, obviously—had opened behind them. In it stood Mr. Tarblecko. Or, to be more precise, *three* Mr. Tarbleckos. They were all as identical as peas in a pod. She had no way of knowing which one, if any, was hers.

"Through here! Quick!" Nadine shrieked. She'd snatched open the nearest door.

Together, they fled.

"Oolohstullalu ashulalumoota!" a woman sang out. She wore a jumpsuit and carried a clipboard, which she thrust into Ellie's face. "Oolalulaswula ulalulin."

"I . . . I don't understand what you're saying," Ellie faltered. They stood on the green lawn of a gentle slope that led down to the ocean. Down by the beach, enormous construction machines, operated by both men and women (women! of all the astonishing sights she had seen, this was strangest), were rearing an enormous, enigmatic structure, reminiscent

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to Ellie's eye of Sunday school illustrations of the Tower of Babel. Gentle tropical breezes stirred her hair.

"Dawn Era, Amerlingo," the clipboard said. "Exact period uncertain. Answer these questions. Gas—for lights or for cars?"

"For cars, mostly. Although there are still a few—"

"Apples—for eating or computing?"

"Eating," Ellie said, while simultaneously Nadine said, "Both."

"Scopes—for dreaming or for resurrecting?"

Neither woman said anything.

The clipboard chirped in a satisfied way. "Early Atomic Age, pre- and post-Hiroshima, one each. You will experience a moment's discomfort. Do not be alarmed. It is for your own good."

"Please." Ellie turned from the woman to the clipboard and back, uncertain which to address. "What's going on? Where are we? We have so many—"

"There's no time for questions," the woman said impatiently. Her accent was unlike anything Ellie had ever heard before. "You must undergo indoctrination, loyalty imprinting, and chronomilitary training immediately. We need all the time-warriors we can get. This base is going to be destroyed in the morning."

"What? I . . ."

"Hand me your key."

Without thinking, Ellie gave the thing to the woman. Then a black nausea overcame her. She swayed, fell, and was unconscious before she hit the ground.

"Would you like some heroin?"

The man sitting opposite her had a face that was covered with blackwork tattoo eels. He grinned, showing teeth that had all been filed to a point.

"I beg your pardon?" Ellie was not at all certain where she was, or how she had gotten here. Nor did she comprehend how she could have understood this alarming fellow's words, for he most certainly had *not* been speaking English.

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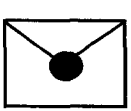

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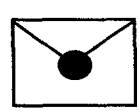

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"Heroin." He thrust the open metal box of white powder at her. "Do you want a snort?"

"No, thank you." Ellie spoke carefully, trying not to give offense. "I find that it gives me spots."

With a disgusted noise, the man turned away.

Then the young woman sitting beside her said in a puzzled way, "Don't I know you?"

She turned. It was Nadine. "Well, my dear, I should certainly hope you haven't forgotten me so soon."

"Mrs. Voigt?" Nadine said wonderingly. "But you're . . . you're . . . young!"

Involuntarily, Ellie's hands went up to her face. The skin was taut and smooth. The incipient softening of her chin was gone. Her hair, when she brushed her hands through it, was sleek and full.

She found herself desperately wishing she had a mirror.

"They must have done something. While I was asleep." She lightly touched her temples, the skin around her eyes. "I'm not wearing any glasses! I can see perfectly!" She looked around her. The room she was in was even more Spartan than the jail cell had been. There were two metal benches facing each other, and on them sat as motley a collection of men and women as she had ever seen. There was a woman who must have weighed three hundred pounds—and every ounce of it muscle. Beside her sat an albino lad so slight and elfin he hardly seemed there at all. Until, that is, one looked at his clever face and burning eyes. *Then* one knew him to be easily the most dangerous person in the room. As for the others, well, none of them had horns or tails, but that was about it.

The elf leaned forward. "Dawn Era, aren't you?" he said. "If you survive this, you'll have to tell me how you got here."

"I—"

"They want you to think you're as good as dead already. Don't believe them! I wouldn't have signed up in the first place, if I hadn't come back afterward and told myself I'd come through it all intact." He winked and settled back. "The situation is hopeless, of course. But I wouldn't take it seriously."

Ellie blinked. Was everybody mad here?

In that same instant, a visi-plate very much like the one in the police car lowered from the ceiling, and a woman appeared on it. "Hero mercenaries," she said, "I salute you! As you already know, we are at the very front lines of the War. The Aftermen Empire has been slowly, inexorably moving backward into their past, our present, a year at time. So far, the Optimized Rationality of True Men has lost five thousand three hundred and fourteen years to their onslaught." Her eyes blazed. "That advance ends here! That advance ends now! We have lost so far because, living down-time from the Aftermen, we cannot obtain a technological superiority to them. Every weapon we invent passes effortlessly into their hands.

"So we are going to fight and defeat them, not with technology but with the one quality that, not being human, they lack—human character! Our researches into the far past have shown that superior technology can be defeated by raw courage and sheer numbers. One man with a sunstroker

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can be overwhelmed by savages equipped with nothing more than neutron bombs—*if* there are enough of them, and they don't mind dying! An army with energy guns can be destroyed by rocks and sticks and determination.

"In a minute, your transporter and a million more like it will arrive at staging areas afloat in null-time. You will don respirators and disembark. There you will find the time-torpedoes. Each one requires two operators—a pilot and a button-pusher. The pilot will bring you in as close as possible to the Aftermen time-dreadnoughts. The button-pusher will then set off the chronomordant explosives."

This is madness, Ellie thought. *I'll do no such thing.* Simultaneous with the thought came the realization that she had the complex skills needed to serve as either pilot or button-pusher. They must have been given to her at the same time she had been made young again and her eyesight improved.

"Not one in a thousand of you will live to make it anywhere near the time-dreadnoughts. But those few who do will justify the sacrifices of the rest. For with your deaths, you will be preserving humanity from enslavement and destruction! Martyrs, I salute you." She clenched her fist. "We are nothing! The Rationality is all!"

Then everyone was on his or her feet, all facing the visi-screen, all raising clenched fists in response to the salute, and all chanting as one, "*We are nothing! The Rationality is all!*"

To her horror and disbelief, Ellie discovered herself chanting the oath of self-abnegation in unison with the others, and, worse, meaning every word of it.

The woman who had taken the key away from her had said something about "loyalty imprinting." Now Ellie understood what that term entailed.

In the gray not-space of null-time, Ellie kicked her way into the time-torpedo. It was, to her newly sophisticated eyes, rather a primitive thing: Fifteen grams of nano-mechanism welded to a collapsteel hull equipped with a noninertial propulsion unit and packed with five tons of something her mental translator rendered as "annihilatium." This last, she knew to the core of her being, was ferociously destructive stuff.

Nadine wriggled in after her. "Let me pilot," she said. "I've been playing video games since Mario was the villain in Donkey Kong."

"Nadine, dear, there's something I've been meaning to ask you." Ellie settled into the button-pusher slot. There were twenty-three steps to setting off the annihilatium, each one finicky, and if even one step were taken out of order, nothing would happen. She had absolutely no doubt she could do it correctly, swiftly, efficiently.

"Yes?"

"Does all that futuristic jargon of yours actually *mean* anything?"

Nadine's laughter was cut off by a *squawk* from the visi-plate. The woman who had lectured them earlier appeared, looking stern. "Launch in twenty-three seconds," she said. "For the Rationality!"

"For the Rationality!" Ellie responded fervently and in unison with Na-

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dine. Inside, however, she was thinking, *How did I get into this?* and then, ruefully, *Well, there's no fool like an old fool.*

"Eleven seconds . . . seven seconds . . . three seconds . . . one second."

Nadine launched.

Without time and space, there can be neither sequence nor pattern. The battle between the Aftermen dreadnoughts and the time-torpedoes of the Rationality, for all its shifts and feints and evasions, could be reduced to a single blip of instantaneous action and then rendered into a single binary datum: win/lose.

The Rationality lost.

The time-dreadnoughts of the Aftermen crept another year into the past.

But somewhere in the very heart of that not-terribly-important battle, two torpedoes, one of which was piloted by Nadine, converged upon the hot-spot of guiding consciousness that empowered and drove the flagship of the Aftermen time-armada. Two button-pushers set off their explosives. Two shock-waves bowed outward, met, meshed, and merged with the expanding shock-wave of the countermeasure launched by the dreadnought's tutelary awareness.

Something terribly complicated happened.

Ellie found herself sitting at a table in the bar of the Algonquin Hotel, back in New York City. Nadine was sitting opposite her. To either side of them were the clever albino and the man with the tattooed face and the filed teeth.

The albino smiled widely. "Ah, the primitives! Of all who could have survived—myself excepted, of course—you are the most welcome."

His tattooed companion frowned. "Please show some more tact, Sev. However they may appear to us, these folk are not primitives to *themselves*."

"You are right as always, Dun Jal. Permit me to introduce myself. I am Seventh-Clone of House Orpen, Lord Extratemporal of the Centuries 3197 through 3992 Inclusive, Backup Heir Potential to the Indeterminate Throne. Sev, for short."

"Dun Jal. Mercenary. From the early days of the Rationality. Before it grew decadent."

"Eleanor Voigt, Nadine Shepard. I'm from 1936, and she's from 2004. Where—if that's the right word—are we?"

"Neither where nor when, delightful aboriginal. We have obviously been thrown into hypertime, that no-longer-theoretical state informing and supporting the more mundane seven dimensions of time with which you are doubtless familiar. Had we minds capable of perceiving it directly without going mad, who *knows* what we should see? As it is," he waved a hand, "all this is to me as my One-Father's clonatorium, in which so many of I spent our minority."

"I see a workshop," Dun Jal said.

"I see—" Nadine began.

Dun Jal turned pale. "A Tarbleck-null!" He bolted to his feet, hand instinctively going for a side-arm which, in their current state, did not exist.

"Mr. Tarblecko!" Ellie gasped. It was the first time she had thought of

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him since her imprinted technical training in the time-fortress of the Rationality, and speaking his name brought up floods of related information: That there were seven classes of Aftermen, or Tarblecks as they called themselves. That the least of them, the Tarbleck-sixes, were brutal and domineering overlords. That the greatest of them, the Tarbleck-nulls, commanded the obedience of millions. That the maximum power a Tarbleck-null could call upon at an instant's notice was four quads per second per second. That the physical expression of that power was so great that, had she known, Ellie would never have gone through that closet door in the first place.

Sev gestured toward an empty chair. "Yes, I thought it was about time for you to show up."

The sinister grey Afterman drew up the chair and sat down to their table. "The small one knows why I am here," he said. "The others do not. It is degrading to explain myself to such as you, so he shall have to."

"I am so privileged as to have studied the more obscure workings of time, yes." The little man put his fingertips together and smiled a fey, foxy smile over their tips. "So I know that physical force is useless here. Only argument can prevail. Thus . . . trial by persuasion it is. I shall go first."

He stood up. "My argument is simple: As I told our dear, savage friends here earlier, an heir-potential to the Indeterminate Throne is too valuable to risk on uncertain adventures. Before I was allowed to enlist as a mercenary, my elder self had to return from the experience to testify I would survive it unscathed. I did. Therefore, I will."

He sat.

There was a moment's silence. "That's all you have to say?" Dun Jal asked.

"It is enough."

"Well." Dun Jal cleared his throat and stood. "Then it is my turn. The Empire of the Aftermen is inherently unstable at all points. Perhaps it was a natural phenomenon—*once*. Perhaps the Aftermen arose from the workings of ordinary evolutionary processes, and could at one time claim that therefore they had a natural place in this continuum. That changed when they began to expand their Empire into their own past. In order to enable their back-conquests, they had to send agents to all prior periods in time to influence and corrupt, to change the flow of history into something terrible and terrifying, from which they might arise. And so they did.

"Massacres, death-camps, genocide, World Wars . . ." (There were other terms that did not translate, concepts more horrible than Ellie had words for.) "You don't really think those were the work of *human beings*, do you? We're much too sensible a race for that sort of thing—when we're left to our own devices. No, all the worst of our miseries are instigated by the Aftermen. We are far from perfect, and the best example of this is the cruel handling of the War in the final years of the Optimized Rationality of True Men, where our leaders have become almost as terrible as the Aftermen themselves—because it is from their very ranks that the Aftermen shall arise. But what *might* we have been?

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"Without the interference of the Aftermen might we not have become something truly admirable? Might we not have become not the Last Men, but the First truly worthy of the name?" He sat down.

Lightly, sardonically, Sev applauded. "Next?"

The Tarbleck-null placed both hands heavily on the table, and, leaning forward, pushed himself up. "Does the tiger explain himself to the sheep?" he asked. "Does he *need* to explain? The sheep understand well enough that Death has come to walk among them, to eat those it will and spare the rest only because he is not yet hungry. So too do men understand that they have met their master. I do not enslave men because it is right or proper, but because I *can*. The proof of which is that I *have!*

"Strength needs no justification. It exists or it does not. I exist. Who here can say that I am not your superior? Who here can deny that Death has come to walk among you? Natural selection chose the fittest among men to become a new race. Evolution has set my foot upon your necks, and I will not take it off."

To universal silence, he sat down. The very slightest of glances he threw Ellie's way, as if to challenge her to refute him. Nor could she! Her thoughts were all confusion, her tongue all in a knot. She knew he was wrong—she was sure of it!—and yet she could not put her arguments together. She simply couldn't think clearly and quickly enough.

Nadine laughed lightly.

"Poor superman!" she said. "Evolution isn't linear, like that chart that has a fish crawling out of the water at one end and a man in a business suit at the other. All species are constantly trying to evolve in all directions at once—a little taller, a little shorter, a little faster, a little slower. When that distinction proves advantageous, it tends to be passed along. The Aftermen aren't any smarter than Men are—less so, in some ways. Less flexible, less innovative . . . look what a stagnant world they've created! What they *are* is more forceful."

"Forceful?" Ellie said, startled. "Is that all?"

"That's enough. Think of all the trouble caused by men like Hitler, Mussolini, Caligula, Pol Pot, Archers-Wang 43. . . . All they had was the force of their personality, the ability to get others to do what they wanted. Well, the Aftermen are the descendants of exactly such people, only with the force of will squared and cubed. That afternoon when the Tarbleck-null ordered you to sit in the window? It was the easiest thing in the world to one of them. As easy as breathing.

"That's why the Rationality can't win. Oh, they *could* win, if they were willing to root out that streak of persuasive coercion within themselves. But they're fighting a war, and in times of war one uses whatever weapons one has. The ability to tell millions of soldiers to sacrifice themselves for the common good is simply too useful to be thrown away. But all the time they're fighting the external enemy, the Aftermen are evolving within their own numbers."

"You admit it," the Tarbleck said.

"Oh, be still! You're a foolish little creature, and you have no idea what

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you're up against. Have you ever asked the Aftermen from the leading edge of your Empire why you're expanding backward into the past rather than forward into the future? Obviously because there are bigger and more dangerous things up ahead of you than you dare face. You're afraid to go there—afraid that you might find *me!*" Nadine took something out of her pocket. "Now go away, all of you."

Flash.

Nothing changed. Everything changed.

Ellie was still sitting in the Algonquin with Nadine. But Sev, Dun Jal, and the Tarbleck-null were all gone. More significantly, the bar felt *real* in a way it hadn't an instant before. She was back home, in her own now and her own when.

Ellie dug into her purse and came up with a crumpled pack of Lucky Strike Greens, teased one out, and lit it. She took a deep drag on the cigarette and then exhaled. "All right," she said, "who are you?"

The girl's eyes sparkled with amusement. "Why, Ellie, dear, don't you know? I'm *you!*"

So it was that Eleanor Voigt was recruited into the most exclusive organization in all Time—an organization that was comprised in hundreds of thousands of instances entirely and solely of herself. Over the course of millions of years, she grew and evolved, of course, so that her ultimate terrifying and glorious self was not even remotely human. But everything starts somewhere, and Ellie of necessity had to start small.

The Aftermen were one of the simpler enemies of the humane future she felt that Humanity deserved. Nevertheless they had to be—gently and nonviolently, which made the task more difficult—opposed.

After fourteen months of training and the restoration of all her shed age, Ellie was returned to New York City on the morning she had first answered the odd help wanted ad in the *Times*. Her original self had been detoured away from the situation, to be recruited if necessary at a later time.

"Unusual in what way?" she asked. "I don't understand. What am I looking for?"

"You'll know it when you see it," the Tarbleck-null said.

He handed her the key.

She accepted it. There were tools hidden within her body whose powers dwarfed those of this primitive chrono-transfer device. But the encoded information the key contained would lay open the workings of the Aftermen Empire to her. Working right under their noses, she would be able to undo their schemes, diminish their power, and, ultimately, prevent them from ever coming into existence in the first place.

Ellie had only the vaguest idea how she was supposed to accomplish all this. But she was confident that she could figure it out, given time. And she had the time.

All the time in the world. O

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All forms that perish other forms supply,
(By turns we catch the vital breath and die)
Like bubbles on the sea of matter borne,
They rise, they break, and to that sea return.
Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*

re: cycling

The universe's pain on giving birth,
twisting time and space by giving birth,
is stamped on every living cell on Earth.

We look on death and pain in terms of waste.
We have to think that our own death is waste—
all our worth is frozen or erased.

All forms that perish other forms supply.
Other forms demand that we supply—
by turns we catch the vital breath and die.

It's written on our flesh the day we're born.
Like bubbles on the sea of matter borne,
they rise, they break, and to that sea return.

The universe's pain on giving birth
is paid, in small, by every cell on Earth.

—Joe Haldeman

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HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU, KID

Mike Resnick

Mike Resnick's latest novel, *The Return of Santiago,* has just been published by Tor Books. We're pleased to note that his last twelve *Asimov's* stories have all been Hugo nominees.

"I came to Casablanca for the waters."

Renault almost guffaws. "Waters? What waters? We're in the desert."

I shrug. "I was misinformed," I say.

Renault gives me a look.

Okay, pal, I think, *I'm keeping my end of the bargain, I gave you a hell of a line, one they'll be quoting for months. Just remember that when* she *shows up.*

Then Renault lays it on me: he's making an arrest tonight. At Rick's. Okay, so he knows about Ugarte. Big deal. He acts like he's doing me a favor, as if we need the publicity.

"We know there are many exit visas sold in this café," he continues, "but we know you have never sold one. That is the reason we permit you to remain open."

"I thought it was because we let you win at roulette." *Oh, I'm in rare form tonight. There's another quotable line for you. Now just remember who your friends are.*

"That is another reason," agrees Renault amiably.

Then comes The Moment. He mentions Victor Lazlo. I act impressed. I'm doing my job, playing my role, piling up points. Why admit that I hate the son of a bitch, that he's got the brains of a flea and the personal magnetism of a fire hydrant, that he speaks only in platitudes?

I start wondering: how can I score a bonus point? Then the perfect solution hits me, and I offer to bet that Lazlo escapes.

I can see in Renault's eyes that he knows that Lazlo can never be confined to Casablanca, that he'll find a way to leave, but he's got his agenda and his priorities, just as I have mine, and he takes the bet.

Then he goes off to arrest Ugarte. Poor little bastard with the poached-egg eyes and the high nasal whine. He wasn't a bad guy, not when you

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compare him to the rest of the scum that inhabit this godforsaken city in the sand. Sure, he lied and he cheated and he took what didn't belong to him—but show me a resident of Casablanca who doesn't do the same thing. Hell, Ferrari buys and sells human beings, and Renault buys and sells the favors of half the human race. All Ugarte did was kill and rob some Nazis.

He runs up to me, the doomed little man in his sweat-stained white suit, the gendarmes hot on his tail, and begs me to help him, hide him, do *something* for him. I can't, of course; there are twenty French cops waving their guns at us . . . but it gives me a chance to add to the persona I've been building so carefully. I push Ugarte away, right into the arms of Renault's men, and brush myself off, uttering some crowd-pleasing drivel about how I stick my neck out for no one. The trick is to say it with insincere sincerity, so that everyone knows I'm going to stick my neck out for someone sooner or later.

I let Renault introduce me to the head Kraut and the obsequeous Kraut and the pizza eater who can't stop talking, and then Sam starts playing The Song and I know Ilsa's here. I pretend I don't, I walk up to him and start demanding that he quit playing, and then I see her. She's a big girl, taller than I remember, and I'm glad they've got me wearing lifts; it wouldn't do to have her tower over me. Her perfume is as sweet and delicate as I remember, her eyes are as blue, her cheekbones as high, her skin as smooth. It still surprises me how such a large woman can be so feminine.

Our eyes meet, and that old feeling is still there. Suddenly I don't care that she deserted me in Paris, I'd sell everything I've got to Ferrari or anyone else if she'd agree to go away with me; hell, I'd even toss Sam into the bargain. She left me once, but it won't happen again, not this time. I've done everything asked of me. I started the casino, I've come up with line after line that people will quote, I've created a persona that men will want to emulate and women will want to seduce. I'm five feet eight, I smoke like a chimney, I'm starting to go bald—and I'm a romantic hero. Now fair is fair. This time she's got to stay with me, this time we have a happy ending. *You owe me that, pal, and I expect you to pay your debts.* Maybe you can even clean things up so we can go back to the States. If not, then Australia, or maybe Rio or Bahia—someplace, *any* place that this goddamned war hasn't reached.

I look at her again, and I remember the way she melted in my arms, the smell and taste and feel of her when I kissed her. And I think of our last morning in Paris. She wore blue, the Germans wore guns. I like the sound of it, but at the last moment *He* jerks me around and changes it. "The Germans wore gray," I find myself saying. "You wore blue." *Okay,* I admit, *it's better your way. But I'm trying, damn it; surely you can see that I'm trying.*

Then she hits me between the eyes with it—she's married to Lazlo.

"That sexless speechmaker?" I want to say. "I'll bet he hasn't touched you in six months." But I don't, I manage to look shocked. And I'm thinking, *That was a low blow, pal. I'm walking the line for you, I'm pulling my weight, and* this *is how you thank me? You'd better get your act together*

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quick, or I'm not the only one who will suffer. I don't have to be cynical and sardonic, you know; I can keep my mouth shut just as easily—and don't you forget it.

She walks off with the King of the Platitudes, and I stay behind to brood. Sam closes the place up and starts playing The Song, while I wonder aloud why out of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world she walked into mine—and the second the words leave my mouth, I know I've given him another line that he'll be taking bows for five years from now.

I'm making you famous, I think. *I've never been better than I am tonight. You want to thank me? Give me the girl, and this time let me keep her.*

Ilsa stops by to pay me a secret visit and tell me why she married Lazlo, as if I give a damn. So she's lived with him for the past year. Who cares? There aren't any virgins left in the world, not in the middle of all this killing. We all have flings, and the dumb ones marry them. All I care about is that she's back, and I have to make sure that this time she stays.

I lie and tell her that Ugarte only gave me one letter of transit, not two. I can get Lazlo out of the country, but she'll have to stay until I can figure a way to get us out together. It doesn't seem to bother her. She left me once, she says, and she hasn't the strength to do it again. Just the words I want to hear.

I know I can take her to bed right now, and it's been a long time, but *He* says No, not yet, we have to build more tension, Lazlo's only a block away and Strasser's goons might break in at any moment, and even Renault could sell you out for the right price.

So we just talk. I'm so pissed that I go out of my way to speak in monosyllables. *No more quotes for you, pal, not until you meet me halfway.*

An hour before dawn I send her back to Lazlo, half-hoping she'll walk in on him with one of the bimbos who set up shop under the gas lamps along the street . . . but I know it won't happen: this guy's too much in love with himself to waste his attentions on anyone else. Then, when the sun comes up, I walk over to the Blue Parrot and offer to sell out to Ferrari. He practically drools at the chance to buy Rick's.

I tell him he's got to keep Sam, and he agrees. Then I decide to do my good deed for the day—I don't figure stealing Lazlo's wife really counts as one—so I tell him that Sam gets a quarter of the profits. He grins and tells me he knows Sam gets only 10 percent, but he's worth a quarter and a quarter's what he'll get. I grimace. He agreed too fast. That means with Ferrari doing the books Rick's won't show a profit for the next ten years, and poor Sam will be working his ass off for twenty bucks a week and tips—but I haven't got time to worry about that, because I'm trying to get all my ducks in a row before the grand climax.

Before long I'm at the airport with Renault. I've told Ilsa to get Lazlo here, to tell him there are two letters of transit and they're for the pair of them. It's going to be interesting to see his face when he finds out we're putting him on the plane all by himself. My guess is that as soon as he figures out that he'll still be able to spout off in front of an audience he won't argue, he'll just grab his letter, kiss Ilsa good-bye, and go.

I still don't know which side Renault's on—the one with the most will-

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ing women, probably—so I take his gun away and turn mine on him. He seems more amused than frightened.

Suddenly Ilsa and Lazlo appear out of the fog, just as the plane to Lisbon begins warming up its engines. I hand him an envelope with one letter, and he doesn't even look at it, he just thanks me and tells me this time our side will win.

I want to sneer and say, "I ain't on your side, sweetheart!" but something—some*one*—stops me. He goes off to check the luggage, and I turn to Ilsa.

"We're together forever now, baby." That's what I *want* to say. But what comes out is some speech about how the problems of three people don't come to a hill of beans, and that he needs her for his work.

I check my pocket. The other letter of transit is gone, and I know with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that Lazlo has both of them.

No! I want to scream. *I did my job! I played my part, I gave you all the quotes you can handle, I let Ugarte go down the tubes and I'm arranging for Lazlo to get out in one piece. I won, damn it! I deserve her!*

Ilsa looks at me with tears in her eyes. "And I said I would never leave you!" she says.

Then don't! I try to say. *I hope you don't think I'm doing all this for the bozo you married.* But the words catch in my throat, and instead I'm telling her that we'll always have Paris.

She's about to say something else, but I just give her a loving smile and find myself saying, "Here's looking at you, kid."

Great. The dumbest thing I've said in years, and it's the one everyone will remember.

Then they're on the plane, and I turn around and Major Strasser's there. He's got no reason in the world to be at the airport except to make me look even more heroic. *Fuck you, pal,* I say silently. *If I don't get the girl, you don't get a John Wayne gunfight.* I shoot Strasser down in cold blood just as the plane takes off.

It's obvious that we need a memorable line, something to break the tension.

Think of your own line. I'm not playing any more.

Finally Renault says, "Round up the usual suspects."

Not bad. I'd have done better, but not bad.

There's nothing left to do. We start walking off into the fog. He says something about going to Brazzaville. Just what I always wanted: a garrison with no electricity, no running water, and no women except for the ones who wear those huge plates in their lips.

Give me a break, I try to say. What comes out is, "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Then it's over, and I'm in limbo. I analyze what I did, what I said, what I could have done better, or at least differently. I've got to prepare, to think of subtle ways to manipulate Him as He manipulates me. I've got a little time to get ready: there'll be the newsreel, and a couple of cartoons, and the coming attractions, and then we start it all over again.

Only this time I'll get the girl. ○

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Robert Silverberg has been writing science fiction for almost fifty years. This five-time-Nebula- and Hugo-award winner brings his masterful style to his latest alternate Roman history tale. Here he shows us just how brutal and treacherous it would be to live during . . .

THE REIGN OF TERROR

Robert Silverberg

Over the past fifteen years I've sporadically been developing an alternate-world scenario in which the Hebrew exodus from Egypt under Moses never happened. Since the Jews never reached Palestine, Christianity never developed and Rome remained pagan, renewing itself constantly during the period we call the Dark Ages, fending off the invasions of the barbarians and sustaining itself as a thriving worldwide empire for thousands of years. The history of Rome in this alternate world is more or less identical (aside from a somewhat different sequence of third-century emperors) to that of our Rome as it developed through the fourth century A.D., when Constantine the Great first divided the Empire into eastern and western domains, but then things began to diverge.

The timeline of the Roma Eterna stories runs from 753 B.C., the traditional date of the founding of the city; our year 2002 is 2755 by Roman reckoning. The story "Via Roma" (Asimov's, *April 1994) is set in the Roman year 2603, which is A.D. 1850 by our calendrical system. That one told of the overthrow of the Imperial system and the re-establishment of a Roman republic. This newest story, "The Reign of Terror," is the immediate prequel to "Via Roma," taking place forty years earlier, in the Roman year 2563 (A.D. 1810), at a time when the fundamental instabilities of the latter-day Empire are beginning to manifest themselves.*

"The emperor," said Quintus Cestius, "dined last night on fish and mushrooms sprinkled with powdered pearls, on lentils with onyx, on turnips with amber. He has the stomach of an ox and the mind of a madman."

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"Ah, do you think he's mad, then?" Sulpicius Silanus asked. A mischievous twinkle came into his eyes. "I don't. I think he's merely playful."

"Playful," Cestius said somberly. "Yes. Feeds his dogs on goose liver. Sleeps on couches of solid silver, with mattresses stuffed with rabbit fur or partridge feathers. Covers his furniture with cloth of gold. Yes, very playful indeed."

"Has buckets of saffron dumped into the palace swimming pool before he'll dip a toe in," Silanus said.

"Cooking-pots of silver."

"Wine flavored with poppy-juice."

"All his food tinted blue one night, green the next, scarlet the night after that."

"Drove a chariot pulled by four elephants down the concourse in front of the Vatican Palace."

"And one drawn by four camels, the week before. It'll be dogs next week, I suppose, and lions the week after that."

"A madman," said Cestius.

"Merely very playful," Silanus said. And they both laughed, though each of them knew only too well that the Emperor Demetrius II's mounting extravagance was not any laughing matter; for Cestius was the Prefect of the Fiscus Imperialis, the emperor's private purse, and Silanus, his counterpart on the other side of the Roman treasury, was Prefect of the Fiscus Publicus, out of which all governmental expenditures came. In some reigns, those two great pots of money had been kept rigidly segregated. In others, the emperors had been not unwilling to dip into their private funds to pay for such popular things as the rebuilding of aqueducts and bridges, the underwriting of gladiatorial games, and the construction of grand new public buildings. But the Emperor Demetrius had never seemed to see any distinction at all between Fiscus Imperialis and Fiscus Publicus. He spent as he pleased, and left it up to Silanus and Cestius to find the money in one department of the treasury or the other. And in the last few years the problem had been growing steadily worse.

It was the first day of the new month, when the two treasurers customarily lunched together in the dining room that was provided for high governmental officials in the senatorial office building just in back of the Senate House. They made a curious couple: the perpetually gloomy Quintus Cestius was round as a barrel, a big, fleshy-cheeked man of florid complexion, and the ever-exuberant Sulpicius Silanus was small and lean and spare, a taut little hatchet of a man who could easily have been tucked in a stray fold of Cestius's vast toga. The lunches that they favored were always the same, a plate of raw vegetables and apples for Cestius, and a gluttonous procession of soups, porridges, stewed meats, and aromatic cheeses soaked in honey for little Silanus. Cestius, plump from childhood though he had never had much of a fondness for food, often wondered where Silanus managed to store all that he was capable of consuming at a single sitting.

As he worked on a great haunch of boar Silanus said, without looking up, "I have had a letter from my brother in Hispania. He tells me the

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Count Valerian Apollinaris has finished the reconquest there and will be returning to the capital soon."

"Wonderful," said Cestius darkly. "A great triumphal feast will be in order, then. A million and a half sesterces scattered at a single throw to pay for it: flamingo brains, mullets baked on a bed of hyacinths shipped up from Sicilia, venison of the giant stag of the far northlands, wines a hundred years old, and all the rest. All of it wasted on Apollinaris, who will disapprove of the expense, and who will sit there stiff as one of those stone gods from Aegyptus, merely nibbling at this dish and that one. But I'll have to find the money for it all the same. Or you will, I suppose."

"My brother says," Silanus continued, as though Cestius had not spoken at all, "that the thrifty Count Valerian Apollinaris is deeply disturbed by the shortfall in military funds that made his work of reconquest so much more complicated than it needed to be, and intends to speak vigorously with His Majesty concerning a tighter domestic budget."

"The count would be well advised not to try."

"Would anyone, even the emperor, dare to lay a finger on the Count Valerian Apollinaris, the hero of the War of Reunification?"

"I don't mean that he'd be in any danger," said Cestius. "Only that the emperor will pay no attention. Just the other day the equally thrifty Larcius Torquatus took the very same matter up with the emperor at the palace. I wasn't there, but I heard. If anything, Torquatus has become more ferocious on the subject of the emperor's wastefulness than Apollinaris ever was, now that he's part of the government himself. So there they were, the consul and the emperor, the consul ranting and shouting, the emperor laughing and laughing."

"And he would laugh at us as well. You and I are the only two officials in the entire government who care at all about his level of expenditures. Other than Apollinaris and Torquatus, of course."

"Yes. All the rest are fools or weaklings, or else just as mad as the emperor himself."

"And you and I are the ones who have to find the funds to pay the bills, somehow. We are the ones who bear the burden of the emperor's lunacy," said Silanus.

"Indeed."

"And has the emperor dismissed Torquatus, then, for shouting at him?"

"Oh, no, not at all. As ever, the emperor is untroubled about such things. After Torquatus left the palace, I'm told, Demetrius sent him a little gift as a peace offering: the beautiful harlot Eumenia, stark naked and covered all over with gold dust, sitting in a jeweled carriage drawn by the black horses of Arabia that cost a hundred thousand sesterces apiece. They say that Torquatus nearly had a stroke when he saw it arrive."

"Well, then," said Silanus, "you'd better start putting money aside for a present for Apollinaris."

The Count Valerian Apollinaris, just then, was hundreds of miles away in the great Hispanian city of Tarraco, the final stopping point on his whirlwind military tour of the Empire's rebellious western provinces. One by one he had subjugated them with a minimal expenditure of force

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and bloodshed: first Sicilia, where all the trouble had begun back in 2563, then Belgica and Gallia, and finally Hispania. His technique had been the same in each place—arriving with a small hand-picked army of tough, grim legionaries, demanding of the local governors an immediate renewal of the oath of allegiance to the emperor, and then the swift seizure and public execution of eight or ten insurrectionist leaders as an example to the others. The idea was to remind the provincials that Roma was still Roma, that the Imperial army was as efficient and ruthless now as it had been in the days of Trajan and Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius seventeen centuries before, and that he, Count Valerian Apollinaris, was the living embodiment of all the ancient Roman virtues that had made the Empire the immortal globe-spanning entity that it was.

And it had worked. In a series of quick, bloody strokes, Apollinaris had put an end—for all time, he hoped—to the slow, steady process of crumbling that had afflicted the Empire for nearly a century, during this era of foolishness and wanton waste that was beginning to be known as the Second Decadence.

Now, coming to the end of his fourth term of office as consul, he was ready to return to Roma and enter into private life once more. Power for its own sake had never interested him, nor great wealth, nor enormous luxury. Wealth was something he had been born to, and he took it for granted; power had accrued to him almost by default from his early manhood on, and because he had never hungered for it he never abused it; and as for enormous luxury, he left that to those who craved it, such as that hapless idiot, the Emperor Demetrius II.

Demetrius, of course, was an unending problem. The craziest emperor of a largely crazy dynasty, he had held the throne for twenty years of ever-increasing madness, and it was small wonder that the Empire seemed to be spinning centrifugally apart. Only the devoted work, behind the scenes, of a small group of staunchly disciplined men like Apollinaris and his Consular counterpart back in Roma, Marcus Larcius Torquatus, had kept the regime from collapsing entirely.

There had been difficulties in the outlying provinces for nearly a century. Some of that was inherent in the Imperial system: the Empire was really too big to be governed from a central authority. That much had been understood from earliest Imperial times, which was why no serious attempt had ever been made to bring such far-off places as India and the lands that lay beyond it under direct Roman administration. Even a one-capital system had proven unworkable, and so Constantinopolis had been founded in the East and the Empire had been divided.

But then, after Saturninus—another of the crazy emperors—had practically bankrupted the Western Empire in his hopeless attempt to conquer the New World, and set it drifting off into the pathetic era later to be called the Great Decadence, the Eastern realm had taken advantage of the West's weakness to invade it and to rule it for two hundred years, until the invincible Flavius Romulus restored the Western Empire's independence. Determined never to allow the East to regain the upper hand, Flavius Romulus had stripped Constantinopolis of its status as a capital city and reunited the severed halves of the Empire a thousand years after their first separation.

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But it would take a Flavius Romulus to govern so great a stretch of territory singlehandedly, and very few of his successors were up to the mark. Within a century after his death the throne was in the possession of Demetrius of Vindonissa, a wealthy provincial patrician who just happened to have a streak of hereditary insanity in his family. Both Demetrius's son Valens Aquila and his grandson Marius Antoninus were notably eccentric emperors; Marius's son Lodovicus had been reasonably stable, but he had blithely handed the throne on to *his* son, the present Emperor Demetrius, who by easy stages had come to make the citizens of Roma believe that they were being ruled once again by Caligula, or Commodus, or Caracalla.

Demetrius II was, at least, not murderous, as those three had been. But his reign, which was now in its twentieth year, was marked by a similar wildness of inspiration. Though he had not, like Caligula, tried to declare himself a god or appoint his horse to the consulship, he had given banquets at which six hundred ostriches were slaughtered at a time, and ordered the sinking of fully laden merchant ships in the harbor at Ostia to demonstrate the Empire's prodigious wealth. Unlike Commodus he had not amused himself by posing as a surgeon and operating on hapless subjects, but he did, now and then, set tame lions and leopards loose in the guest rooms of the palace to terrify his sleeping friends. He did not, like Caracalla, have his brother and other members of his own family murdered, but he did stage lotteries that all members of his court were required to enter at great expense, in which one man might win ten pounds of gold and another ten dead dogs or a dozen spoiled cabbages.

In the days of the indifferent Valens Aquila and the witless Marius Antoninus such far-off provinces as Syria and Persia began running themselves with very small regard for the decrees of the central government. That in itself caused little alarm in Roma, so long as the exotic goods that those lands exported to the capital continued to arrive. But then, in Lodovicus's reign, the two provinces of Dalmatia and Pannonia, just east of the Italian heartland of the Empire, also tried to break free, and had to be reined in by force. And then, soon after Demetrius II came to power, Sicilia, always a troublesome island of malcontents, chose to cease paying taxes to the Imperial tax collectors. When Demetrius took no action, the movement spread to Belgica and Gallia and Hispania and declarations of independence quickly followed. That, of course, could not be tolerated, even by the likes of Demetrius.

Apollinaris was consul then, his third time in the office, sharing the consulship with the feckless drunkard Duilius Eurupianus. Since the time of Maximilian the Great, at least, the consulship had been a basically meaningless post, a mere honorific, with nothing like the virtually royal powers it had had in the ancient days of the Republic. As Epictetus had said long ago, the consulship under the emperors, having lost nearly all its functions, had degenerated into a post that allowed you nothing more than the privilege of underwriting the games of the Circus and giving free dinners to a lot of undeserving flatterers.

But a crisis now was at hand. Firm action was required. Apollinaris, resigning his consulship, called upon Eurupianus to do the same, making it

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clear to him that if he chose to remain in office it would have adverse effects on his health. Then Apollinaris prevailed upon the emperor, who was preoccupied at the time with forming a collection of venomous serpents from the farthest reaches of the realm, to reappoint him to the consulship in collaboration with an equally public-spirited citizen, the dour and austere Larcius Torquatus. At Apollinaris's urgent behest the emperor agreed that he and Torquatus would be granted emergency powers far beyond any that the consuls had had for hundreds of years, and would remain in office indefinitely, instead of serving one-year terms at the pleasure of the emperor. Torquatus would attempt to restore some sanity on the home front; Apollinaris, an experienced soldier, would march through the rebellious provinces, bringing them one after another to heel.

Which had been achieved. Here in Tarraco, Apollinaris was packing up, getting ready to go home.

Tiberius Charax, his aide-de-camp, a slender, narrow-eyed Greek from Ionia who had served at his side for many years, entered and said, "A letter for you from Roma, from the Consul Larcius Torquatus, Count Valerian. Also Prince Laureolus has arrived, and is waiting outside to see you."

Taking the letter from Charax, Apollinaris said, "Send him in."

He broke the seal and quickly glanced over the text. His fellow consul, concise as ever, had written, "I have told the emperor of your successes in the field, and he responds with the usual childishness. As for affairs here at Roma, the problems grow worse all the time. If his spending continues at the present pace the treasury will soon be down to its last denarius. I am planning to take severe measures." And, with an elaborate flourish, the signature, nearly the size of the text itself: *M. Larcius Torquatus,* Consul.

Looking up, Apollinaris became aware that Prince Laureolus was in the room.

"Bad news, sir?" the prince asked.

"Infuriating news," said Apollinaris. He made no effort to hide his smoldering anger. "A letter from Torquatus. The emperor is running the treasury dry. What did he pay, I wonder, for that mountain of snow he had them set up in his garden last summer? Or for that tunic of plates of gold, studded with diamonds and pearls? And what little expenses are coming next? I fear to guess."

"The emperor," Laureolus said quietly, and a derisive flicker appeared for a moment at one corner of the younger man's mouth. "Ah! The emperor, yes." He needed to say no more.

Apollinaris had come to like the prince a great deal. They were men built to the same general design, short, compact, muscular, though there was little else in the way of physical resemblance, Apollinaris being a man of dark, almost swarthy complexion with a broad triangular nose, a generous mouth, and deep-set coal-black eyes beneath a dense, shaggy brow, while Laureolus was pale, with chilly aristocratic features, a long, narrow high-bridged nose, a thin-lipped mouth, ice-cold eyes of the palest blue. He came from ancient Imperial lineage, tracing his ancestry in some fashion to the Emperor Publius Clemens, who had reigned a hundred years or so before the Byzantine conquest of the Western Empire. Dis-

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gusted with the profligate ways of Demetrius II, he had withdrawn five years back to his family's property in the country to occupy himself with the study of early Roman history and literature. That was how Apollinaris, whose own country home was nearby and who shared Laureolus's antiquarian interests, had come to meet him. He saw quickly that Laureolus, who was ten years his junior, had the same nostalgia for the strict ethical rigor of the long-vanished Roman Republic that he himself had, and Larcius Torquatus, and virtually no one else in modern Roma.

When he embarked on the War of Reunification Apollinaris had chosen the prince to be his second in command, sending him shuttling from one newly pacified province to another to see to it that the process of restoring full Imperial control went smoothly forward in each of them. Lately Laureolus had been in northern Gallia, where there had been some minor disturbances at a place called Bononia, on the coast along the channel that divided Gallia from Britannia. Thinking that this renewal of the troubles might spread across the channel to the previously unrebellious Britannia, he had repressed it rigorously. Now, with all resistance to the Imperial government at last wiped out, he had come to Tarraco to present Apollinaris with his final report on the state of the provinces.

Apollinaris leafed quickly through it and set it aside. "All is well, I see. I need stay here no longer."

Laureolus said, "And when you return to the capital, sir, will you attempt to get Demetrius to restrain himself a little?"

"I? Don't be silly. I know better than to try to tell an emperor what he ought to do. History is full of tales of the sad fates of those who tried it. Go back and re-read your Suetonius, your Tacitus, your Ammianus Marcellinus. No, Laureolus, I'm going back to my estate in the country. Four consulships is quite enough for me. Anyway, my fellow Consul Marcus Larcius has the responsibility for affairs in Urbs Roma." He tapped Torquatus's letter. "He tells me here that he's going to take severe measures to clean things up. Good for him, if he can do it."

"Can he do it single-handedly?" Laureolus asked.

"No. No, probably not." He shot a glance at the prince. "How would you like to be Consul, Laureolus?"

"*Me,* sir?" Laureolus's eyes were wide with astonishment.

"You, yes." Then Apollinaris shook his head. "No, I suppose not. Demetrius would never allow it. You're of royal blood, after all. He'd see it as the prelude to his own overthrow." Smiling, he said, "Well, it was just a thought. You and Torquatus, between you, might just be able to do the job. But it's probably safer for your health to stay out of the capital, anyway. You go back to your estate, too. We'll get together once a week and have a good meal and discuss ancient history, and let Torquatus worry about the mess in Roma. Eh, Laureolus? We've worked hard out here in the provinces for five whole years. I think we deserve a rest, don't you?"

In his wood-paneled office at the top of the nine-story Consular building at the eastern end of the Forum the Consul Larcius Torquatus stacked and restacked the pile of documents on his desk, tidying their edges with a fastidiousness that one might not have expected in a man of

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so massive and heavy-set a build. Then he stared fiercely up at the two prefects of the Fiscus, who had delivered these papers an hour ago and now were sitting uneasily in front of him. "If I've read these correctly, and I think I have, then there's no single department of the Imperial government that even came close to staying within its budget in the last fiscal year. That's correct, isn't it, Silanus?"

The Prefect of the Fiscus Publicus nodded unhappily. His famously buoyant spirits were nowhere in evidence just now. "This is so, Consul."

"And you, Cestius," Torquatus said, turning his glare in the direction of the Prefect of the Fiscus Imperialis. "You tell me here that the emperor overdrew his personal funds last year by thirty-one million sesterces, and you made the deficit good by borrowing the money from Silanus?"

"Yes, sir," big round-bellied Cestius said in the smallest of voices.

"How could you? Where's your sense of responsibility to the nation, to the Senate, to your own conscience? The emperor squanders thirty-one million on top of what he's already got on hand for squandering, which must be immense, and you simply grab it out of the funds with which we're supposed to be repairing the bridges and sweeping the dung out of the stables and paying Apollinaris's soldiers? I ask you again: how *could* you?"

A flicker of defiance glowed in Cestius's eyes. "You'd do better to ask, how *couldn't* I, Consul. Would you have me tell the emperor to his face that he's spending too much? How long, do you think, would it take him to find a new Prefect of the Fiscus Imperialis? And how long would it take me to find a new head?"

Torquatus responded with a snort. "Your responsibility, Cestius, what about your responsibility? Even if it *does* cost you your head, it's your job to prevent the emperor from overspending. Otherwise why do we have a Prefect of the Fiscus at all? —And you, Silanus? By what right did you grant Cestius's request for those thirty-one million? You weren't being asked to confront the emperor here, only to say no to Cestius. But you didn't do it. Is saving your friend's neck more important to you than the financial welfare of the Empire, which you are sworn to defend?"

Silanus, shamefaced, offered no reply.

Torquatus said, finally, "Shall I ask for your resignations?"

"You can have mine at any time," said Cestius.

"And mine, sir," Silanus said.

"Yes. Yes. And then I replace you with—whom? You two are the only worthwhile men in the whole administration, and neither of you is worth very much at all. But at least you keep honest accounts. —You *do* keep honest accounts, don't you? The deficit isn't even bigger than these documents of yours claim it is?"

"The accounts are accurate ones, sir," said Silanus stiffly.

"The gods be thanked for small mercies, then. —No, keep your jobs. But I want reports of a different sort from you both from now on. I want the names of the spenders. A detailed list: department heads, the ones who encourage the emperor in his folly, those who sign the vouchers authorizing the payouts that you two are so ready to approve. And not just the department heads but anyone in the chain of command who is in a position to say no to spending requests and conspicuously fails to do so."

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The two prefects were staring at him, horrified.

"Names, sir?" Cestius asked. "Of all such people?"

"Their names, yes."

"So that they can be reprimanded?"

"So that they can be removed from office," said the consul. "The entire pack of them will go, the worst ones first, but every last one of them, eventually. Since the emperor can't be controlled, we'll control the men who serve him. I want the first lists by tomorrow afternoon." Torquatus waved them from the room. "No. Tomorrow morning," he said, when they were at the door.

But he did not intend to wait even that long to begin making a list of his own. He knew who the first victims of the purge would have to be: the entourage of the emperor's own household, the little cluster of parasitical lickspittles and sycophants and leeches who hovered about him day and night, egging foolish Demetrius on to ever greater triumphs of grotesque improvidence and lining their own pockets with the pieces of gold that went spilling away on all sides.

He knew the names, most of them. The officials of the cubiculo, the emperor's intimate attendants, his grooms and pimps and butlers, many of them men of immense wealth in their own right, who went home from the royal palace every night to pleasant palaces of their own: there was Polybius, there was Hilarion—two Greeks, he thought, clamping his lips in displeasure—and the Hebrew, Judas Antonius Soranus, and the private secretary, Statius, and the royal cobbler, Claudius Nero, who made the fabulous jewel-encrusted shoes that Demetrius would never wear twice, and the court physician who prescribed such costly rarities as medicines for the monarch, taking his own percentage from the suppliers—what was his name, Mallo, Trallo, something like that?—and the architect, Tiberius Ulpius Draco, who as Minister of Public Works had built all those useless new palaces for the emperor, and then torn them down and built even grander ones on their sites—

No, Draco had died a year or two ago, probably of shame over his own misdeeds, for as Torquatus remembered him he was fundamentally an honorable man. But there were plenty of others to go on the list. Gradually, over the next hour, Torquatus added name after name, until he had fifty or sixty of them. A good beginning, that. His fury mounted as he contemplated their sins. A cold fury, it was, for he was by nature a frosty man.

After twenty years it was time, and long past time, to put a stop to Demetrius's imbecilic prodigality, before he brought the Empire down about him. Whatever the risks, Torquatus meant to place himself in the emperor's way. It was in his blood, his loyalty to the Empire. A Torquatus had been consul in the time of Marcus Aurelius, and another in the reign of Diocletianus, and there had been other great Torquati along the way, and now he was the Torquatus of the era, the Consul Marcus Larcius Torquatus, adding distinction to his line. Those other Torquati looked down on him out of history. He knew he must save Roma for them.

This Roma, he thought, this Empire, to which we have devoted so much loyalty, so great a part of our lives, for these two thousand years past—

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For a moment he supposed that the best tactic would be to round up five or six of the emperor's henchmen at a time, extracting them piecemeal from the emperor's proximity so that Demetrius might not notice what was going on, but then he saw that that was precisely the wrong approach. Get them all, right away, a single bold sweep, the way Apollinaris had handled things in the provinces. Out of the palace, into the prisons: bring the situation to immediate resolution. Yes. That was the way.

He imagined the conversation with the emperor that would follow.

"Where are my beloved friends? Where is Statius? Where is Hilarion? What has become of Claudius Nero?"

"All of them under arrest, your majesty. Crimes against the state. We have reached such a precarious position that we can no longer afford the luxury of having such people in your household."

"My doctor! My cobbler!"

"Dangerous to the welfare of the nation, Caesar. Dangerous in the extreme. I have had spies out among the people in the taverns, and they are talking revolution. They are saying that the streets and bridges and public buildings are going unrepaired, that there is no money available for distribution to the populace, that the war in the provinces is likely to break out again at any moment—and that the emperor must be removed before things get even worse."

"*Removed?* The emperor? Me?"

"They cry out for a return to the Republic."

Demetrius would laugh at that. "The Republic! People have been crying out for a return to the Republic for the last eighteen hundred years! They were saying it in Augustus's time, ten minutes after he threw the Republic overboard. They don't mean it. They know the emperor is the father of the country, their beloved prince, the one essential figure who—"

"No, your majesty, this time they mean it." And Torquatus would sketch for the emperor a vivid, terrifying picture of what a revolution would mean, laying it on as thickly as he knew how—the uprising in the streets, senators hunted down, some of them slaughtered in their beds, and, above all, the massacre of the royal family, blood flowing, the Imperial museums looted, the burning of palaces and governmental buildings, the desecration of temples. The emperor himself, Demetrius II Augustus Caesar, crucified in the Forum. Better yet: crucified head downward, hanging there dizzy with agony, while the jeering populace threw rocks or perhaps hurled spears—

Yes. Ten minutes of that and he would have Demetrius cowering in his golden sandals, wetting his purple robe in fear. He would retreat into his palace and hide himself there among his toys and his mistresses and his tame lions and tigers. Meanwhile the trials would go forward, the miscreants would rapidly be found guilty of their embezzlements and malfeasances, sent into exile in the remote provinces of the realm—

Exile?

Exile might be too risky, Torquatus thought. Exiles sometimes find their way home—seek vengeance—

Something more permanent than exile might be a wiser idea, he told himself.

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He scratched away with his stylus. The list grew and grew. Apollinaris would be proud of him. Constantly quoting ancient history at him, telling him how much better things had been under the Republic, when staunch stoic men like Cato the Elder and Furius Camillus and Aemilius Paulus set examples of self-denial and discipline for all the nation. "The Empire is in profound need of purification," Apollinaris liked to say: Torquatus had heard him say it a thousand times. So it was. And by the time the count got back from Gallia or Lusitania or wherever he was right now, he would discover that that profoundly needed purification was already under way.

They will all die, he told himself: these parasites who surround the emperor, these caterpillars who devour the commonwealth.

That something strange was going on at Roma began to become apparent to Apollinaris in the first minutes after the merchant vessel that had brought him from Tarraco had reached the harbor at Ostia. The familiar ritual in which the customs officials of the port came aboard, received their bribes, and presented a perfunctory bill of duty payable did not take place. Instead there was an actual search, six men in the black-and-gold uniforms of the Imperial treasury poking through the ship's hold and making a formal tally of the cargo, item by item.

In theory all merchandise shipped into Italia from the provinces for resale was subject to customs duties. In practice, the customs inspectors, having paid stiff bribes to the secretariat of their department to get their jobs, skimmed off most of the customs revenue and allowed only a fraction of the legitimate amount to dribble through to the Imperial treasury. Everyone knew it, but no one seemed to care. Apollinaris himself disliked the arrangement, even though he did not see why transfers of merchandise from one part of the Empire to another should be subject to customs charges in the first place. But the bribing of customs officials in lieu of paying duty was only one out of a myriad practices of the Imperial regime that cried out for reform, and in any event the affairs of merchants and shippers had never been anything to which he had devoted much attention.

Today's process, though, caused unusual delays in disembarking. After a time he sent for the ship's captain, a genial black-bearded Carthaginian, and asked what was going on.

The captain, who was livid with dismay and indignation, wasn't sure. New procedures, he said. Some sort of shakeup in the Department of Customs, that was all he knew.

Apollinaris guessed at first that it might have something to do with the revenue shortfall about which Torquatus had written him: the emperor, running low on cash, had instructed his officials to start increasing governmental revenues. Then he realized how little sense that notion made. Demetrius had never shown any awareness that there was a relationship between governmental income and Imperial expenditure. No, this must be the doing of Torquatus himself, Apollinaris decided: one of the "severe measures" that his co-consul had said he would be taking in order to set things to rights.

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From Ostia, Apollinaris went straight to the suburban villa that he maintained along the Via Flaminia, just north of the city wall. It had been in the care of his younger brother, Romulus Claudius Apollinaris, during the five years of his absence, and Apollinaris was pleased to discover that Romulus Claudius, although he too had been absent from Roma most of that time and was living up in Umbria right now, had had the place kept up as though his brother might require its use at any moment.

His homeward route took him through the heart of the city. It was good to be back in Roma, to see the ancient buildings again, two thousand years of history standing forth on every street, the marble walls of temples and government offices, some as old as Augustus and Tiberius, mellowed by time despite centuries of ongoing repair, and the medieval buildings, solid and a little coarse, their ornate façades throbbing in the hot sunlight, and then the new buildings of the Decadence, all strange parapets and soaring flying buttresses and sudden startling cantilevered wings, like those of some great beetle, leaping off into space. How glad he was to see it all! Even the heat stirred some gladness in him. It was the month of Julius, hot and humid, a time when the river ran very low, turbid, choked with yellow silt. The day's heat held the city in its tight grip. Far away, lightning sounded—a dry crack, lightning without rain, the sinister thunder of the absent-minded gods. There was a malarious stench in the air. He had forgotten how Roma stank in the summer, during all those years he had spent off in the lesser cities of the western provinces. Roma was the grandest city that ever was or would be, but there was no escaping the truth of its odor this time of year, the effluvia of a million people, their discarded rotting food, their wastes, the sweat of those million bodies. He was a fastidious man. He disliked the heat, the stench, the dirt. And yet, yet—this was Roma, and there was no city like it!

When Apollinaris reached his villa he sent word to Torquatus that he had returned and would be pleased to meet with him as soon as possible, and at once a messenger came back from Torquatus inviting him to dine at his house that evening.

That was a doubtful pleasure. Apollinaris, for all his scholarly interest in the stoic virtues of Republican Roma, was a civilized and cultivated man who appreciated fine wines and imaginative cooking. His colleague in the consulship was of another kind entirely, very much an Old Roman in his distaste for comfort and luxury—a ponderous, wintry-souled sort who showed little interest in food or wine or literature or philosophy, indeed whose only pleasurable pursuit, so far as Apollinaris knew, was to hunt wild boar in the snow-choked forests of the northern provinces.

But this night Torquatus's table was set for a person of Apollinaris's tastes, with any number of wines and sherbets and a splendid main course of spiced venison. There was no entertainment—dancers and musicians would not be appropriate for such a meeting—and just the two of them were at the table. Apollinaris had never married and Torquatus's wife, who was seldom seen in public, made no appearance even in her own home this evening.

He had indeed made changes in the customs procedures, he told Apolli-

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naris. He had made other changes as well. The whole depraved crew that surrounded the emperor had been rounded up and taken away. There would be no more wild spending sprees on Demetrius's part. Torquatus had instituted reforms on every level of the government, as well. Corrupt officials had been removed. Regulations that had been on the books for decades but never enforced were now being applied. All governmental departments had been ordered to draw up new budgets and they would be required to live within them.

"And the emperor?" Apollinaris asked, when Torquatus finally paused in his recitation. "How has he taken your dismissal of his coterie of flunkies? I see your head is still on its shoulders, so you must have found some way of pacifying him, but what could it have been?"

"His Majesty is not in any position to order executions these days," said Torquatus. "His Majesty is currently under house arrest."

Apollinaris felt a stab of amazement.

"Do you seriously mean that? Yes, yes, of course you do. You always seriously mean it. —Penned up in his own palace, is he?"

"In the palace guest-house, actually. That new building, the weird-looking one with those bizarre mosaics. I have troops posted on duty around it twenty-four hours a day."

"But surely the Praetorian Guard wouldn't have allowed—"

"I took the precaution of having the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard removed from office, and replaced him with a man of my own staff, a certain Atilius Rullianus. The Praetorians have received a generous payment and have willingly taken an oath of allegiance to their new prefect."

"Yes. They usually do, if paid well enough."

"And so we keep Demetrius well supplied with women and food, but otherwise he is completely isolated. He has no contact with any of the officials of his court, or with the members of the Senate. Naturally I stay away from him also. You will, I hope, keep your distance from him yourself, Apollinaris. Essentially you and I, jointly, are the emperor, now. All governmental decrees flow from the Consular office; all governmental officials report to us."

Apollinaris gave Torquatus a keen, close look. "So you intend to keep the emperor a prisoner for the rest of his life? You know there'll be problems with that, man. Crazy or not, the emperor is expected to present himself before the people at certain times of the year. The New Year festival, the opening of the new Senate session, the first day of the season's games at the Colosseum—you can't just hide him away indefinitely, you know, without arousing a little curiosity about where he is."

"For the moment," said Torquatus, "it has been announced that His Majesty is ill. I think we can leave it at that for the time being. How fast he recovers—well, we can deal with that issue later. There are other problems."

"Such as?"

"The Senate, for one. You may or may not be aware that a goodly number of senators have been quite comfortable with Demetrius's way of doing things. The general corruption spills over to them as well. With no real emperor to hold them accountable, they do as they please, and plen-

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ty of them live like little Demetriuses themselves. The kind of orgiastic existences that Roma was famous for in Nero's time, I mean. We can't allow a return to that kind of thing. The Senate is in need of some reform itself. If it doesn't get it, many of its members will try to obstruct our program."

"I see," Apollinaris said. "Are you talking about removing certain senators from office, then?"

"That might be necessary."

"But only an emperor can do that."

"We will do it in the name of the emperor," said Torquatus. "As we do everything else that must be done."

"Ah," Apollinaris said. "I see. In the name of the emperor."

For the first time he noticed how tired Torquatus looked. Torquatus was a big man, of formidable physical strength and legendary endurance; but his eyes, Apollinaris saw, were reddened with fatigue, and his heavy-jowled face was drawn and sallow.

"There's even more to deal with," Torquatus went on.

"More than dismissing the whole court, imprisoning the emperor, and purging the Senate?"

"I refer to the possibility of a general uprising of the people," Torquatus said portentously.

"Because of the reforms you've been instituting, you mean?"

"On the contrary. My reforms are the salvation of the Empire, and sooner or later everyone will see that—if we can hold things together until that point. But the people may not allow us enough time to explain things to them. You've been away these five years and you don't know what's been happening here. I want you to come with me to the Subura tomorrow."

"The Subura," Apollinaris said. He pressed his hands together and brought the tips of his fingers to his lips. The Subura, as he recalled, was an ancient slum district of the capital, a filthy, smelly place of dark alleys and crooked streets that led nowhere. Every few hundred years some civic-minded emperor would order it cleaned out and rebuilt, but its innate nature was unconquerable and the pestilential nature of the place always managed to reassert itself in a couple of generations. "The Subura is restless, is it? A few truckloads of free bread and wine can fix that, I'd think."

"Wrong. Those people have plenty to eat as it is. For all of Demetrius's excesses, this is still a prosperous land. And, whatever you think, revolutions don't spring up because of poverty. It's the passion for novelty, the pursuit of excitement, that does it. Revolution is the fruit of idleness and leisure, not of poverty."

"The idleness and leisure of the slum-dwellers of the Subura," Apollinaris said, gazing thoughtfully at the other man. It was an interesting concept, marvelous in its complete absurdity.

But it appeared that Torquatus found a certain logic in it. "Yes. Amid the general breakdown of law and order, this thing that some people call the Decadence, they've come to see that nobody's really in charge of anything any more. And so they want to get themselves a bigger share of the

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loot. Overthrow the monarchy, butcher all the patricians, divide up the wealth among themselves. I've been in their taverns, Apollinaris. I've listened to their harangues. You come with me tomorrow and sit down next to them and you'll hear the same things yourself."

"Two consuls, going freely and unguarded into slum taverns?"

"They'll have no idea who we are. I'll show you how to dress."

"It would be interesting, I suppose. But, thank you, no. I'll take your word for it: there's restlessness in the Subura. But we still have an army, Torquatus. I've just spent five years pacifying the provinces. I can pacify the Subura too, if I have to."

"Turn the Roman army against the citizens of the capital? Think about it, my friend. The agitators in the Subura must be dealt with *before* the real trouble breaks out. —I agree, a great deal for you to consider on your first day back. But there's no time to waste. We face a very big job." Torquatus signaled to a slave who was waiting nearby to refill their glasses. "Enough of this talk for the moment, all right? What do you think of this wine? Forty-year-old Falernian, it is. From the emperor's own cellars, I should tell you. I had some brought here especially for this occasion."

"Quite splendid," said Apollinaris. "But age has made it a trifle bitter. Would you pass me the honey, Torquatus?"

Charax said, "This is the list so far, sir."

Apollinaris took the sheet of paper from his aide-de-camp and ran quickly down the names. "Statius—Claudius Nero—Judas Antonius Soranus—who are these people, Charax?"

"Lucius Status is the emperor's private secretary. Soranus is a Hebrew who is said to import unusual animals from Africa for his collection. I have no information about Claudius Nero, sir, but he is probably a craftsman to the court."

"Ah." Apollinaris turned his attention back to the list. "Hilarion and Polybius, yes. The personal attendants. I remember those two. Oily little bastards, both of them. Glitius Agricola. Gaius Callistus. Marco Cornuto—what kind of name is that, 'Marco Cornuto?'"

"A Roman name, sir. I mean, it's Roman in language, not Latin."

That puzzled him. "Latin—Roman—what's the difference?"

"The lower classes speak some rough new kind of language now that they call 'Roman,' a dialect—the dialect of the people, it's called. Derived from Latin, the way the languages of the provinces are. It's like an easier, sloppier form of Latin. They've begun translating their own names into it, I hear. This Marco Cornuto is probably one of the emperor's coachmen, or a stable groom, something along those lines."

Apollinaris made a face. He very much disliked the custom, of late so prevalent out in the provinces, of speaking local dialects that were coarse, vulgar versions of Latin mixed with primitive regional words: one way of speaking in Gallia, another in Hispania, another in Britannia, and still another, very different from the others, in the Teutonic provinces. He had suppressed the use of those languages, those dialects, wherever he had encountered it. So now it was happening here too? "What sense does that make, a new dialect of Latin used right here in Roma? In the provinces,

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those dialects are a way of signifying independence from the Empire. But Roma can't secede from itself, can it?"

Charax merely smiled and shrugged.

Apollinaris remembered now what Torquatus had told him about the restlessness in the slums, the likelihood of some kind of uprising among the plebeians. Was a new bastard form of Latin beginning to establish itself among the poor, a private language of their own, setting them apart from the hated aristocrats? It was worth investigating. He knew from his experiences in the provinces what power language could have in fomenting political unrest.

He looked once more at the list of those whom Torquatus had arrested.

"Matius—Licentius—Licinius—Caesius Bassius—" He looked up. "What do these little red marks next to some of the names mean?"

"Those are the ones who have already been executed," Charax said.

"Did you say 'executed'?" Apollinaris asked, startled.

"Put to death, yes," said Charax. "You seem surprised. I thought you knew, sir."

"No," Apollinaris said. "I haven't heard anything about executions."

"At the far end of the Forum, in the little plaza in front of the Arch of Marcus Anastasius: he's had a platform set up there, and every afternoon there have been executions all week, four or five a day."

"He?"

"Larcius Torquatus, sir," Charax said, in the tone of one who was explaining something to a child.

Apollinaris nodded. This was the tenth day since his return to Roma, and they had been busy days. Torquatus had never given him a chance, at their first meeting in Torquatus's home, to explain that it was his intention to give up his consulship and retire to private life. And once he had heard what Torquatus had been up to—putting the emperor under house arrest, throwing His Majesty's playmates into prison, issuing a raft of stringent new decrees designed to cleanse the government of corruption—Apollinaris had realized that his notion of retiring was an impossible one. Torquatus's program, commendable though it was, was so radical that he could not be left to carry it out alone. That would make him, in effect, dictator of Roma, and Apollinaris knew from his readings in history that the only kind of dictators Roma would tolerate were those who, like Augustus Caesar, were able to conceal their dictatorial ways behind a façade of constitutional legitimacy. A mere appointive consul, ruling on his own after overthrowing the emperor, would not be able to sustain himself in power unless he assumed the Imperial powers himself. Apollinaris did not want to see Torquatus do that. Maintaining the Consular system was essential now. And Torquatus must have a legitimate Consular colleague if he wanted his reforms to have any success.

So Apollinaris had put all thought of retirement aside and had spent his first days back reestablishing his presence at the capital, setting up his office in the Consular building, renewing his connections with the important men of the Senate, and otherwise resuming his life at the center of power. He had met daily with his colleague Torquatus, who assured him that the work of purging the commonwealth of idlers and parasites

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was moving along smoothly, but up until now Apollinaris had not pressed him for details. That had been a mistake, he realized now. Torquatus's policy of ending the drain on the public treasury that the emperor's huge mob of hangers-on had created was one that he had applauded, of course. But it had never occurred to Apollinaris that his co-consul was having them killed. And his travels around the city since his return had not taken him anywhere near that little plaza of Marcus Anastasius, the place of execution where heads rolled in the dust by order of M. Larcius Torquatus.

"Perhaps I should have a little talk with Torquatus about this," Apollinaris said, rising and tucking the list of the arrested men into a fold of his robe.

Torquatus's office was one floor above Apollinaris's in the Consular building. In the old days the two consuls had divided the ninth floor between them: that was how it had been in Apollinaris's first three terms as consul, certainly. The first time, as junior consul, he had used the office on the eastern side of the building, looking down into Trajan's Forum. During his second and third terms, when he now was senior consul, he had moved over to the somewhat more imposing rooms on the western side of the top floor. But during Apollinaris's long absence in the provinces Torquatus had expanded his own Consular domain into the part of the floor that had previously been his, and had set up a secondary office for his colleague on the building's eighth floor. "The consul's tasks have increased so greatly since we reconstituted the post," Torquatus explained, a little shamefacedly, when Apollinaris, having returned, showed up to reclaim his old office. "You were away fighting in Sicilia and probably wouldn't be back for two or three years, and I needed more room close at hand for the additional staff members that now were required, et cetera, et cetera—"

The new arrangement rankled more than a little, but this was not the moment, Apollinaris felt, to start quarreling with his co-consul about office space. There would be time to express concern over matters of precedence and status once things were a little more stable at the capital.

Torquatus was busily signing papers when Apollinaris arrived. He seemed unaware, for a moment, that his fellow consul had entered the room. Then he looked up and offered Apollinaris a quick apologetic smile. "So much paperwork—"

"Signing more death-warrants, are you?"

Apollinaris had meant the statement to sound neutral, even bland. But Torquatus's frowning response told him that he had not quite succeeded.

"As a matter of fact, Apollinaris, I am. Does that trouble you?"

"A little, perhaps. I don't think I understood that you were actually going to have Demetrius's people put to death."

"I thought we had discussed it."

"Not in so many words. You said you were 'removing' them, I think. I don't recall your explicitly explaining what you meant by that." Already a defensive iciness was visible in Torquatus's eyes. Apollinaris brought forth the list of prisoners that Charax had procured for him and said, "Do you think it's wise, Torquatus, to inflict such severe penalties on such trivial people? The emperor's barber? The emperor's clown?"

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"You've been away from the capital many years," Torquatus said. "These men are not such simple innocents as you may think. I send no one lightly to his death."

"Even so, Torquatus—"

Smoothly Torquatus cut him off. "Consider our choices, if you will. Strip them of office but let them go free? Then they remain among us, stirring up trouble, conniving to get themselves back to their high positions in the palace. We merely imprison them? Then we must maintain them at public expense, perhaps for the rest of their lives. Send them into exile? Then they take their illicitly gained wealth with them, which otherwise we could recapture for the treasury. No, Apollinaris, getting rid of them once and for all is the only solution. If we allow them to live, sooner or later they'll manage to get access to His Majesty again and begin working him up to overthrow us."

"So we put them to death to minimize the risks to ourselves?"

"The risks to the Empire," Torquatus said. "Do you think I care that much about my own life? But if we fall, the Empire falls with us. These men are the enemies of the commonwealth. You and I are all that stand between them and the reign of chaos. They have to go. I thought we had already come to full agreement on that point."

In no way was that statement true, Apollinaris knew. Yet he saw the validity of the argument. The Empire stood, not for the first time, at the brink of anarchy. The disturbances in the provinces had given early warning of that. Augustus had created the Imperium by dint of military force, and it was the army that had sustained the emperors on their thrones all these centuries. But emperors ruled, ultimately, by the consent of the governed. No army was strong enough to compel the populace to accept the authority of a wicked or crazy emperor indefinitely: that had been shown again and again, from the time of Caligula and Nero on up through history. Demetrius was plainly crazy; most of the government officials were demonstrably corrupt; if Torquatus was right that the plebeians were muttering about a revolution, and it was altogether possible that he *was*, then a fierce purge of the corruption and craziness might be the only way of heading off calamity. And to allow Demetrius's minions to live, and to regroup, and to regain the emperor's ear, was to invite that very calamity.

"Very well," said Apollinaris. "How far do you intend to carry this, though?"

"As far as the situation demands," Torquatus said.

The month of Julius gave way to the month of Augustus, and the worst summer in Roma's long history went grinding on, intolerable heat, choking humidity, low ominous clouds hiding the sun, lightning in the hills but never any rain, tensions rising, tempers snapping everywhere as the daily procession of carts bearing the latest batches of the condemned rolled onward toward the executioner's block. Great throngs came to watch each day, commoners and patricians alike, looking toward the headsman and his victims in the fascinated way one stares at a weaving serpent making ready to strike. The spectacle of horror was terrifying but

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no one could stay away. The reek of blood hung over Roma. With each passing day the city grew more pure, and much more frightened, paralyzed by fear and suspicion.

"Five weeks now," said Lactantius Rufus, who was the presiding magistrate of the Senate, "and the killing has spread into our own House itself."

"Pactumeius Pollio, tried and found guilty," Julius Papinio said. He stood closest to Rufus among the little group of men on the portico of the Senate this sizzling, steamy morning.

"Likewise Marcus Florianus," said the rotund Terentius Figulus.

"And Macrinus," said Flavius Lollianus.

"And Fulpianus."

"That's it, I think. Four all together."

"Four senators, yes," said Lactantius Rufus. "So far. But who's next, I ask you? You? Me? Where does it stop? Death is king in Roma these days. This whole House is endangered, my friends." He was a great sickle of a man, enormously tall, stoop-shouldered, his back curving in a wide arc, his face in profile a jagged blade of angular features. For thirty years he had been a prominent member of the Senate: a confidant of the late Emperor Lodovicus, a close adviser to the present Emperor Demetrius, a three-time holder of the consulship. "We must find a way of protecting ourselves."

"What do you suggest?" Papinio asked. "Shall we call upon the emperor to remove the consuls?"

It was said in a half-hearted way. Papinio and all the others knew how ludicrous a suggestion that was. "Let me remind you," Lactantius said anyway, "that the emperor is a prisoner himself."

"So he is," Papinio conceded. "All power lies with the consuls now."

"Quite true," Rufus said. "And therefore our task must be to drive a wedge between them. We should go, three or four of us, or perhaps five, as a delegation to Apollinaris. He's a reasonable man. Surely he sees the damage Torquatus is doing, the risk that these purges, if they continue, will get out of hand and run through Roma like a wildfire. We ask him to remove Torquatus from office and name a new colleague."

"To remove Torquatus from office—!" said Terentius Figulus, astounded. "You make it sound so easy! But could he do it?"

"Apollinaris has just reconquered four or five whole provinces without any serious difficulty. Why would he have any trouble overcoming one man?"

"What if he doesn't want to?" Papinio asked. "What if he *approves* of what Torquatus has been doing?"

"Then we remove them both," replied Rufus. "But let's keep that for a last resort. Which of you will come with me to Apollinaris?"

"I," said Papinio immediately. But no one else spoke out.

Rufus looked about at the others. "Well?" he said. "Figulus? Lollianus? What about you, Priscus? Salvius Julianus?"

In the end Rufus managed to collect just two companions for his mission, the ever-ambitious Julius Papinio and another senator named Gaius Lucius Frontinus, a younger man whose family had enormous wine-producing properties in southern Italia. Though these were busy

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times in the Consular office—the consuls' days were consumed by the task of purification, making out arrest orders, attending trials, authorizing the executions of those found guilty, which was nearly everyone placed on trial—they had surprisingly little difficulty gaining an audience with the Consul Valerian Apollinaris. But winning his support was not quite so easy.

"What you're asking is treasonous, as you surely must know," said Apollinaris calmly. He had remained seated behind his desk; the others stood before him. "By suggesting that one constitutionally appointed consul should depose his colleague, you're inviting me to join the conspiracy that you apparently have formed to overthrow the legitimate government of the Empire. That in itself is a capital offense. I could have you whisked off to prison this very minute. Before the end of the week you'd be staring at the headsman's axe. Eh, Rufus? Papinio? Frontinus?"

It was impossible to tell whether he meant it as a threat or as a joke. Lactantius Rufus, steadfastly meeting the consul's coolly appraising gaze, said, "You'd probably follow us there in the next week or two, Count Apollinaris. Certainly you, of all people, must understand how dangerous Torquatus is to everybody's welfare, certainly to ours and yours, perhaps even to his own."

"Dangerous to yours, yes. But why to mine? I've backed Torquatus in all of his actions, haven't I? So why would my respected Consular colleague turn against me?"

"Because the way things are going," said Rufus, "the removal of Emperor Demetrius will become a political necessity somewhere down the line, more likely sooner than later. And the emperor has no sons. The heir to the throne is his addlepated and utterly incapable brother Marius, who sits quietly giggling to himself in his palace on Capraea. He can never reign. You and Torquatus are the only plausible successors to Demetrius in sight. But you can't both become emperor. Do you see my logic, Apollinaris?"

"Of course I do. But I have no intention of having the emperor killed, and I doubt that Torquatus does either, or he'd have done it already."

Rufus sighed. "Unless he's simply biding his time. But let that be as it may: perhaps you don't feel that you're in any danger, dear Apollinaris, but we certainly do. Four members of the Senate are dead already. Others are probably on the proscribed list. Torquatus is drunk with power, killing people as quickly as he can, scores of them. Some of them very much deserved their fate. In other cases Torquatus is simply settling old personal accounts. To claim that the Senator Pactumeius Pollio was an enemy of the realm—or Marcus Florianus—"

"To save your skins, then, you want me to lift my hand against my colleague in violation of my oaths. And if I refuse?"

"The Senate, with the emperor indisposed, has the power to strip you and Torquatus both of your consulships."

"Do you think so? And if you can manage to bring it off, who will our replacements be? You, Rufus? Young Frontinus here? And would the people ever accept you as their leaders? You know perfectly well that Torquatus and I are the only men left in this rotting Empire who have the strength

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to keep things from falling apart." Apollinaris smiled and shook his head. "No, Rufus. You're just bluffing. You have no candidates to take our places."

"Agreed," Rufus said, without any hesitation. "This is certainly so. But if you refuse us, you'll leave us no choice but to try to strike Torquatus down ourselves, and we may very well fail, which will plunge everything into disorder and turmoil as he takes his revenge. You and you alone can save Roma from him. You must remove him and take sole command, and make an end to this reign of terror before a river of senatorial blood runs in the streets."

"You want me to be emperor, then?"

This time Rufus, taken by surprise, did hesitate before replying. "Do you want to be?"

"No. Never. If I take sole command, though, I would be acting essentially as an emperor. Before long, as you correctly foresee, I *would* be emperor. But the throne has no appeal for me. The most I want is to be consul."

"Be consul, then. Get rid of Torquatus and appoint some congenial partner, anyone you like. But you have to stop him before he devours us all. Yourself included, I warn you, Apollinaris."

When the three senators had left his office Apollinaris sat quietly for a time, replaying the discussion in his mind. There was no denying the truth of anything Rufus had said.

Rufus was grasping and manipulative, of course, as one would expect anyone of his great wealth and long occupation of a position close to the centers of Imperial power to be. But he was not really evil, as powerful men went, and he was certainly no fool. He saw very clearly, and Apollinaris saw it as well, how unlikely it was that there would be any end to Torquatus's frenzied purification of the realm, that not only were prominent senators like Lactantius Rufus in obvious danger but that it would go on and on until the list of victims included Count Valerian Apollinaris himself.

That was inevitable. Apollinaris, though he had approved from the start of the need to call a halt to the Emperor Demetrius's excesses and purge the court of its parasites, had seen Torquatus's zealousness growing day by day. And he was far from comfortable with the extreme nature of Torquatus's methods—midnight arrests, secret trials, verdict within an hour, execution the next day.

Now that Torquatus had succeeded in establishing death as a valid penalty for undermining the moral fiber of the Empire, the list of potential victims of the purge had become almost infinite, too. Demetrius's clump of odious hangers-on, some of them truly vicious and some mere witless buffoons, was gone now. So were dozens of the most corrupt members of the bureaucracy and four of their facilitators in the Senate. And, yes, just as Rufus had guessed, many more indictments were pending. Torquatus's concentration was focused now on the unrest in the Subura, where the ordinary theft and vandalism had given way to rioting and anarchic outcries against the government. Soon Torquatus would be execut-

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ing plebeians too. If left unchecked he would purge Roma from top to bottom.

That a cleansing of the commonwealth had been in order was something that Apollinaris did not question. Despite his reservations he had made no attempt to interfere in what Torquatus had been doing these five weeks past. But it was clear to him now that Torquatus had begun ruling almost as a dictator, a murderous one at that, and that as Torquatus's Consular colleague he was expected to continue to join him in that role, or else face the possibility of becoming a victim of Torquatus's zeal himself. For a time would come—if it was not already at hand—when it would be necessary to say to Torquatus, "Things have gone far enough, now. This is where we should stop the killings." And what if Torquatus disagreed?

Very likely the name of Valerian Apollinaris would be the next one added to the roster of the condemned, in that case. And, though Apollinaris had never been greatly concerned about his personal safety, he saw now that in the present situation he must preserve his life for the sake of the Empire. There was no other bulwark but him against the encroaching chaos.

Best to face the issue immediately, Apollinaris decided.

He went to see Torquatus.

"The Senate is growing very uneasy," he said. "These four executions—"

"They were traitors," Torquatus said sharply. Sweat was rolling down his fleshy face in the dense, humid atmosphere of the room, but for some reason unfathomable to Apollinaris the man was wearing a heavy winter toga. "They wallowed in Demetrius's iniquities to their own enormous profit."

"No doubt they did. But we need the Senate's continued support if we're to carry through our program."

"Do we? The Senate's just an antiquarian vestige, something left over from the ancient Republic. Just as the Consuls were, before you and I revived the office. Emperors functioned perfectly well for at least a thousand years without sharing any power at all with the Senate or the Consuls. We can get along without the Senate too. Who's been talking to you? Lactantius Rufus? Julius Papinio? I know who the malcontents are. And I'll take them down, one by one, until—"

"I beg you, Torquatus." Apollinaris wondered whether he had ever uttered those words before in his life. "Show some moderation, man. What we're trying to achieve is a very difficult thing. We can't simply dispense with the backing of the Senate."

"Of course we can. The axe awaits anyone who stands in our way, and they all know it. What was Caligula's famous line? 'Oh, that these annoying Romans had only a single neck'—something like that. That's how I feel about the Senate."

"Caligula is not, I think, the philosopher you ought to be quoting just now," said Apollinaris. "I urge you again, Torquatus, let us be more moderate from here on. Otherwise, what I fear is that you and I are lighting a fire in Roma that may prove to be extremely difficult to put out, a fire that may easily consume you and me as well before it's over."

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"I'm not convinced that moderation is what we need at this point," said Torquatus. "And if you fear for your life, my friend, you have the option of resigning your consulship." His gaze now was cold and uncompromising. "I know that you've often spoken of returning to private life, your studies, your country estate. Perhaps the time has come for you to do just that."

Apollinaris summoned the most pleasant smile he could find. "Not just yet, I think. Despite the objections I've just put to you, I still share your belief that there's much work for us to do in Roma, and I intend to stand with you while it's being carried out. You and I are colleagues in this to the end, Marcus Larcius. We may have disagreements along the way, but they'll never be permitted to come between us in any serious way."

"You mean that, do you, Apollinaris?"

"Of course I do."

A look of enormous relief appeared on Torquatus's heavy-featured, deeply furrowed face. "I embrace you, colleague!"

"And I you," said Apollinaris, standing and offering his hand to the bigger man, but making no move to let the talk of embraces be anything more than metaphorical.

He returned quickly to his headquarters on the floor below and called Tiberius Charax to him.

"Take ten armed men—no, a dozen," he told the aide-de-camp, "and get yourself upstairs to Marcus Larcius's office. Tell his bodyguards, if you encounter any, that you're there at my orders, that a matter concerning the Consul Torquatus's security has come up and I have instructed you to place these men at the consul's disposal at once. I doubt that they'll try to stop you. If they do, kill them. Then grab Torquatus, tell him that he's under arrest on a charge of high treason, bundle him out of the building as fast as you can, and place him under tight guard in the Capitoline dungeons, where no one is to be allowed to see him or send messages to him."

It was to Charax's great credit, Apollinaris thought, that not the slightest evidence of surprise could be detected on his face.

The problem now was choosing a new co-consul, who would aid him in the continuing work of reconstruction and reform without in any way presenting serious opposition to his programs. Apollinaris was adamant in his desire not to rule by sole command. He lacked the temperament of an emperor and he disliked the idea of trying to reign dictatorially, as a kind of modern-day Sulla. Even after twenty centuries the memory of Sulla was not beloved by Romans. So a cooperative colleague was needed, quickly. There was no question in Apollinaris's mind that the task that he and Torquatus had begun needed to be seen through to completion, and that at this moment it was very far from being complete.

He hoped it could be done without many more executions, though. Certainly Torquatus in his Old Roman rigor had allowed the process of purgation to go too far. The first spate had been sufficient to eliminate the worst of the ones Torquatus had referred to, rightly, as the caterpillars of the commonwealth. But then he had begun his cleansing of the Senate, and by now everyone of any consequence in the realm seemed to be de-

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nouncing everybody else. The prisons were filling up; the headsman's arm was growing weary. Apollinaris meant to check the frantic pace of the killings, and eventually to halt them altogether.

He was pondering how he was going to reach that goal, three days after Torquatus had been taken into custody, when Lactantius Rufus came to him and said, "Well, Apollinaris, I hope your soul is at peace and your will is up to date. We are scheduled to be assassinated the day after tomorrow, you and I, and some fifty of the other senators, and Torquatus also, and the emperor too, for that matter. The whole regime swept away in one grand sweep, in other words."

Apollinaris shot a look of bleak displeasure at the wily old senator. "This is no time for jokes, Rufus."

"So you see me as a comedian, do you? The joke will be on you, then. Here: look at these papers. The entire plot's spelled out for you in them. It's Julius Papinio's work."

Rufus handed a sheaf of documents across the desk. Apollinaris riffled hastily through them: lists of names, diagrammatic maps of the governmental buildings, outlines of the planned sequence of events. It had occurred to Apollinaris that Rufus's purpose in coming to him with these charges was simply to get rid of an annoyingly ambitious young rival, but no, no, this was all too thorough in its detail to be anything but authentic.

He considered what little he knew of this Papinio. A red-haired, red-faced man, old-line senatorial family. Young, greedy, shifty-eyed, quick to take offense. Apollinaris had never seen much to admire in him.

Rufus said, "Papinio wants to restore the Republic. With himself as consul, of course. I suspect he thinks he's the reincarnation of Junius Lucius Brutus."

Apollinaris smiled grimly. He knew the reference: a probably mythical figure out of the distant past, the man who had expelled the last of the tyrannical kings who had ruled Roma in its earliest days. It was this Brutus, supposedly, who had founded the Republic and established the system of Consuls. Marcus Junius Brutus, the assassin of Julius Caesar, had claimed him as an ancestor.

"A new Brutus among us?" Apollinaris said. "No, I don't think so. Not Papinio." He glanced through the papers once more. "The day after tomorrow. Well, that gives us a little time."

With Torquatus locked away, the task of dealing with this was entirely his. He ordered Papinio arrested and interrogated. The interrogation was swift and efficient: at the first touch of the torturer's tongs Papinio provided a full confession, naming twelve co-conspirators. The trial was held that evening and the executions took place at dawn. So much for the new incarnation of Junius Lucius Brutus.

There were great ironies here, Apollinaris knew. He had put Torquatus away in the hope of halting the torrent of killings, and now he had ordered a whole new series of executions himself. But he knew he had had no choice. Papinio's plot would surely have brought the whole Imperial system down if the man had managed to live another two days.

With that out of the way, he took up the matter of the increasing troubles in the slum districts. The rioters were breaking statues, looting

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shops. Troops had been sent in and hundreds of plebeians had been killed, yet each day brought new violence.

Apollinaris's agents brought him pamphlets that the agitators in the Subura were passing out in the streets. Like the late Julius Papinio, these men were calling for the overthrow of the government and the restoration of the Republic of olden times.

The return of the Republic, Apollinaris thought, might actually not be such a bad thing. The Imperial system had produced some great rulers, yes, but it had also brought the Neros and Saturninuses and Demetriuses to the throne. Sometimes it seemed to him that Roma had endured this long despite most of its emperors, rather than because of them. Reverting now to the way things had been in antiquity, the Senate choosing two highly qualified men to serve as consuls, supreme magistrates ruling in consultation with the Senate, holding office not for life but only for brief terms that they would voluntarily relinquish when the time came—there was more than a little merit in that idea.

But what he feared was that if the monarchy were overthrown Roma would pass instantly through the stage of a republic to that of a democracy—the rule of the mob, giving the government over to the man who promised the greatest benefits to the least worthy segments of society, buying the support of the crowd by stripping the assets of the productive citizens. That was not to be tolerated: democracy in Roma would bring madness even worse than that of Demetrius. Something had to be done to prevent that. He ordered his men to seek out and arrest the ringleaders of the Subura anarchy.

Meanwhile Torquatus himself, safely tucked away in the Imperial dungeons, lay under sentence of death. The Senate, with Lactantius Rufus presiding over the trial, had been quick to indict him and find him guilty. But Apollinaris had not been able to bring himself, thus far, to sign the death-warrant. He knew that he would have to deal with it sooner or later, of course. Torquatus, once imprisoned, could never be freed, not if Apollinaris intended to remain alive himself. But still—to send the man to the block—

Apollinaris left the matter unresolved for the moment and returned to the issue of the new co-consul.

He went through the list of senators but found no one who might be acceptable. They were all tainted in one way or another by ambition, by corruption, by laziness, by foolishness, by any of a dozen sins and flaws. But then the name of Laureolus Caesar came to mind.

Of royal blood. Intelligent. Young. Presentable. A student of history, familiar with the errors of Roma's turbulent past. And a man without enemies, because he had wisely kept himself far from the capital during the most deplorable years of Demetrius's reign. They would work well together as Consular colleagues, Apollinaris was sure.

Apollinaris had sounded Laureolus out about the consulship once already, back in Tarraco. But he had withdrawn the suggestion as soon as he had made it, realizing that the emperor would probably see young Laureolus as a potential rival for the throne and reject the nomination. That problem was no longer a factor.

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Well, then. Summon Laureolus from his country retreat, let him know that Torquatus had been removed from office, tell him that his duty as a Roman required him to accept the consulship in Torquatus's place. Yes. Yes.

But before Apollinaris could call Tiberius Charax in to dictate the message to him Charax came running into his office unbidden, flushed, wild-eyed. Apollinaris had never seen the little Greek so flustered-looking before.

"Sir—sir—"

"Easy, man! Catch your breath! What's happened?"

"The—emperor—" Charax could barely get the words out. He must have sprinted all the way across the Forum and up the eight flights of stairs. "Has bribed—his way—out of his confinement. Is—back in the palace. Is under—the protection—of the former Praetorian Prefect, Leo Severinus." He paused to collect himself. "And has named a completely new set of governmental ministers. Many of whom are dead, but he doesn't know that yet."

Apollinaris muttered a curse. "What is he saying about the consuls?"

"He has sent a letter to the Senate, sir. Commanding that yourself and Torquatus be dismissed."

"Well, at least I've taken care of the second part of that for him already, eh, Charax?" Apollinaris gave the aide-de-camp a grim smile. This was a maddening development, but he had no time for anger now. Action, quick and decisive, was the only remedy. "Get me the same dozen men you used when you arrested Torquatus. And half a dozen more of the same quality. I want them assembled outside this building ten minutes from now. I'm going to have to pay a little visit to the Praetorians. —Oh, and send word to Prince Laureolus that I want him here in Roma as soon as he can get here. Tomorrow, at the latest. No: tonight."

The headquarters of the Praetorian Guard had been located since the time of Tiberius in the eastern part of the city. By now, nearly eighteen centuries later, the Praetorians, the emperor's elite personal military force, had come to occupy a huge forbidding block there, a dark, ugly building that was meant to frighten, and did. Apollinaris understood the risks he was running by presenting himself at that menacing garrison. The little squad of armed men accompanying him had purely symbolic value: if the Praetorians chose to attack, there would be no withstanding their much greater numbers. But there were no options here. If Demetrius had really regained control, Apollinaris was a dead man already, unless he succeeded in winning the Praetorians over.

Luck was with him, though. The mystique of the Consular emblem, the twelve bundles of birchwood rods with the twelve axes protruding through, opened the gates of the building for him. And both of the Praetorian Prefects were on the premises, the emperor's man Leo Severinus and the replacement whom Torquatus had appointed, Atilius Rullianus. That was a good stroke, finding them both. He had expected to find Rullianus; but Severinus was the key player at the moment, and it had been more likely that he would be at the palace.

They might have been stamped from the same mold: two big pock-marked men, greasy-skinned, hard-eyed. The Praetorians had certain ex-

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pectations about what their commanders were supposed to be like, and it was good policy to see that those expectations were met, which almost always was the case.

Severinus, the former and present prefect, had served under Apollinaris as a young officer in the Sicilian campaign. Apollinaris was counting on the vestiges of Severinus's loyalty to him to help him now.

And indeed Severinus looked bewildered, here in the presence not only of his rival for command of the Guard but also of his own one-time superior officer. He stood gaping. "What are you doing here?" Apollinaris asked him immediately. "Shouldn't you be with your emperor?"

"I—sir—that is—"

"We needed to confer," Rullianus offered. "To work out which one of us is really in charge."

"So you asked him to come, and he was madman enough to do it?" Apollinaris laughed harshly. "I think you've spent too much time around the emperor, Severinus. The lunacy must be contagious."

"In fact it was my idea to come," said Severinus stolidly. "The situation—the two of us holding the same post, Rullianus and I—"

"Yes," Apollinaris said. "One of you appointed by an emperor who has lost his mind, and the other one appointed by a consul who has lost his job. —You do know that Torquatus is in the dungeons, don't you, Rullianus?"

"Of course, sir." It was hardly more than a whisper.

"And you, Severinus. Surely you understand that the emperor is crazy."

"It is very bad, yes. He was foaming at the mouth, sir, when I left him an hour ago. Nevertheless—His Majesty ordered me—"

"Give me no neverthelesses," Apollinaris snapped. "Orders coming from a crazy man have no value. Demetrius is unfit to rule. His years on the throne have brought the Empire to the point of collapse, and you two are the men who can save it, if you act quickly and courageously." They stood before him as though frozen, so profoundly awed they did not seem even to be breathing. "I have tasks for you both, which I want you to carry out this very morning. You will have the gratitude of the Empire as your reward. And also the gratitude of the new emperor, and of his consuls." He transfixed them, each in his turn, with an implacable stare. "Do I make myself clear? The men who make emperors reap great benefit from their deeds. This is your moment in history."

They understood him. There was no doubt about that.

He gave them their instructions and returned to the Consular building to await results.

It would be a long and difficult day, Apollinaris knew. He barricaded himself within his office, with his little group of guardsmen stationed in front of his door, and passed the hours reading here and there in Lentulus Aufidius's account of the reign of Titus Gallius, in the *Histories* of Sextus Asinius, in Antipater's great work on the fall of Roma to the Byzantines, and other chronicles of troubled times. In particular he lingered over Sextus Asinius's account of Cassius Chaerea, the colonel of the Guards who had slain the mad Emperor Caligula, even though it meant his own doom when Claudius followed his nephew Caligula to the throne. Cassius

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Chaerea had known what needed to be done, aware that it might cost him his life, and he had done it, and it had. Apollinaris read Asinius's account of Chaerea twice through, and gave it much thought.

Late afternoon brought a great crack of thunder and a flash of lightning that seemed to split the skies, and then torrential rainfall, the first rain the city had had in the many weeks of this ferociously hot summer. Apollinaris took it as an omen, a signal from the gods in whom he did not believe that the miasma of the hour was about to be swept away.

Rullianus was admitted to his presence only minutes afterward, drenched by the sudden downpour. The execution of the former Consul Marcus Larcius Torquatus, Rullianus reported, had been duly carried out, secretly, in the dungeons, as ordered. Virtually on his heels came Severinus, with the news that in accordance with Count Apollinaris's instructions the late Emperor Demetrius had been smothered in his own pillows, the body weighted with rocks, thrown into the Tiber at the place where such things usually were done.

"You'll return to your barracks immediately and say nothing about this to anyone," Apollinaris told them both, and they gave him brisk, enthusiastic salutes and left.

To Charax he said, "Follow them and have them taken into custody. Here are the orders for their arrests."

"Very good, sir. The prince Laureolus is outside, sir."

"And still almost an hour before nightfall. He must have borrowed the wings of Mercurius to get here this fast!"

But the prince's appearance showed not the least sign that he had hurried unduly to the capital. He looked as cool as ever, calm, self-possessed, an aristocrat to the core, his chilly blue eyes betraying no trace of concern at the disarray that was apparent all over the city.

"I regret to tell you," Apollinaris began at once, in his most exaggeratedly solemn tone, "that this is a day of great sorrow for the Empire. His Majesty Demetrius Augustus is dead."

"A terrible loss indeed," said Laureolus, in that same tone of mock solemnity. But then—clearly his quick mind needed only a fraction of an instant to leap to the right conclusion—a look of something close to horror came into his eyes. "And his successor is to be—"

Apollinaris smiled. "Hail, Laureolus Caesar Augustus, Emperor of Roma!"

Laureolus held his hands up before his face. "No. No."

"You must. You are the savior of the Empire."

Only this morning—it seemed years ago—Apollinaris had thought to invite Laureolus to join him in the consulship. But Demetrius's unexpected brief escape from his confinement in the royal guest-house had ended all that. Apollinaris knew that he could make Charax Consul now, or Sulpicius Silanus, the thrifty Prefect of the Fiscus Publicus, or anyone else he pleased. It would not matter. The role that needed filling this day was that of emperor. And, very quickly, Laureolus had seen that too.

Color had come to his face. His eyes were bright with anger and shock.

"My quiet life of retirement, Apollinaris—my work as a scholar—"

"You can read and write just as well in the palace. The Imperial library,

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I assure you, is the finest in the world. Refusing is not an option. Would you have Roma tumble into anarchy? You are the only possible emperor."

"What about yourself?"

"I was bred to be a military man. An administrator. Not an emperor—no, there's no one else but you, Caesar. No one."

"Stop calling me 'Caesar'!"

"I must. And *you* must. I'll be beside you, your senior consul. I had thought to retire also, you know, but that too will have to wait. Roma demands this of us. We have had madness upon madness in this city, first the madness of Demetrius, then the different sort of madness that Torquatus brought. And there are men in the Subura threatening yet another kind of madness. Now all that must end, and you and I are the only ones who can end it. So I say it once again: 'Hail, Laureolus Caesar Augustus!' We will present you to the Senate tomorrow, and the day after that to the people of the city."

"Damn you, Apollinaris! Damn you!"

"For shame! What way is that, Caesar, to speak to the man who has placed you on the throne of Augustus?"

Lactantius Rufus himself, as the presiding magistrate of the Senate, presented the motion that awarded Laureolus the titles of Princeps, Imperator, Pontifex Maximus, Tribune, and all the rest that went with being First Citizen, Emperor of Roma, and, as the senators got quickly to their feet to shout their approval, lost no time in declaring that the vote was unanimous. The Count Valerian Apollinaris was confirmed immediately afterward as consul once again, and the eighty-three-year-old Clarissimus Blossius, the eldest member of the Senate, won quick confirmation also as Apollinaris's new colleague in the consulship.

"And now," said Apollinaris that night at the palace, "We must begin the task of restoring the tranquility of the realm."

It was a good glib phrase, but converting it from rhetoric into reality posed a greater challenge than even Apollinaris had realized. Charax had built a network of agents who traversed the city day and night to detect unrest and subversion, and they reported, to a man, that the poison of democratic ideas had spread everywhere in the capital. The people, the plebeians, those without rank or property of any kind, had not been in any way distressed to see mass executions of Imperial courtiers in the plaza of Marcus Anastasius, nor did it trouble them when the consuls were sending packs of senators to the scaffold, nor when they learned of the virtually simultaneous deaths of the Consul Torquatus and the Emperor Demetrius. So far as they were concerned it would be just as well to arrest the entire class of men who were qualified to wear the toga of freeborn citizenship, and their wives and children as well, and send them off for execution, and divide their property among the common folk for the welfare of all.

Apollinaris decreed the formation of a Council of Internal Security to investigate and control the spread of such dangerous ideas in the capital. He was its chairman. Charax and Lactantius Rufus were the only other members. When Laureolus protested being omitted from the group, Apol-

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linaris named him to it also, but saw to it that its meetings always were held when the new emperor was otherwise occupied. Many unpleasant things needed to be done just now, and Laureolus was, Apollinaris thought, too proper and civilized a cavalier to approve of some of the bloody tasks ahead.

So am I, Apollinaris thought, a proper and civilized cavalier, and yet these weeks past I have waded through rivers of blood for the sake of sparing our Empire from even greater calamity. And I have come too far now for turning back. I must go onward, on to the other shore.

The ringleader of the rioting in the Subura had now been identified: a certain Greek named Timoleon, a former slave. Charax brought Apollinaris a pamphlet in which Timoleon urged the elimination of the patrician class, the abolition of all the existing political structures of the Empire, and the establishment of what he called the Tribunal of the People: a governing body of a thousand men, twenty from each of the fifty districts of the capital city, chosen by popular vote of all residents. They would serve for two years and then would have to step down so that a new election could be held, and no one could hold membership in the Tribunal twice in the same decade. Men of the old senatorial and knightly ranks would not be permitted to put themselves forth as candidates.

"Arrest this Timoleon and two or three dozen of his noisiest followers," Apollinaris ordered. "Put them on trial and see to it that justice is swift."

Shortly Charax returned with the news that Timoleon had disappeared into the endless caverns of the Underworld, the ancient city beneath the city, and was constantly moving about down there, keeping well ahead of the agents of the Council of Internal Security.

"Find him," Apollinaris said.

"We could search for him in there for five hundred years and not succeed in finding him," said Charax.

"Find him," Apollinaris said again.

The days went by, and Timoleon continued to elude capture. Other plebeian revolutionaries were not as clever, or as lucky, and arrested agitators were brought in by the cartload. The pace of executions, which had fallen off somewhat during the period of official mourning following the announcement of Emperor Demetrius's death and the ceremonies accompanying Emperor Laureolus's accession, now quickened again. Before long there were as many each day as there had been toward the end of Torquatus's time; and then the daily toll surpassed even that of Torquatus.

Apollinaris had never been one to indulge in self-deception. He had removed Torquatus in the interests of peace, and here he was following the same bloody path as his late colleague. But he saw no alternative. There was necessity here. The commonwealth had become a fragile one. A hundred years of foolish emperors had undermined its foundations, and now they had to be rebuilt. And since it appeared unavoidable that blood must be mixed into the mortar, so shall it be, Apollinaris thought. So shall it be. It was his duty, painful though it sometimes was. He had always understood that word, "duty," as meaning nothing more complicated than "service": to the Empire, to the emperor, to the citizens of Roma, to his own

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sense of his obligations as a Roman. But he had discovered in these apocalyptic days that it was more complex than that, that it entailed a heavy weight of difficulty, conflict, pain, and necessity.

Even so, he would not shirk it.

During this time the Emperor Laureolus was rarely seen in public. Apollinaris had suggested to him that it would be best, in this transitional period, if he let himself be perceived as a remote figure sequestered in the palace, floating high above the carnage, so that when the time of troubles finally ended he would not seem unduly stained with the blood of his people. Laureolus seemed willing to follow this advice. He kept to himself, attending no Senate sessions, taking part in none of the public rituals, issuing no statements. Several times a week Apollinaris visited him at the palace but those visits were Laureolus's only direct contact with the machinery of the government.

Somehow he was aware, though, of the hectic activities in the plaza of execution.

"All this bloodshed troubles me, Apollinaris," the emperor said. It was the seventh week of his reign. The intolerable heat of summer had given way to the chill of an unnaturally cold and rainy autumn. "It's a bad way to begin my reign. I'll be thought of as a heartless monster, and how can a heartless monster expect to win the love of his people? I can't be an effective emperor if the people hate me."

"In time, Caesar, they'll be brought to understand that what is happening now is for the good of our whole society. They'll give thanks to you for rescuing the Empire from degradation and ruin."

"Can we not revive the old custom of sending our enemies into exile, Apollinaris? Can we not show a little clemency now and then?"

"Clemency will only be interpreted as weakness just now. And exiles return, more dangerous than ever. Through these deaths we guarantee the peace of future generations."

The emperor remained unconvinced. He reminded Apollinaris that the brunt of punishment now was falling on the common people, whose lives had always been hard even in the best of times. The contract that the emperors had made with the people, said Laureolus, was to offer stability and peace in return for strict obedience to Imperial rule; but if the emperor made the bonds too tight, the populace would begin turning toward the fantasy of a happier life in some imaginary existence beyond death. There had always been religious teachers in the East, in Syria, in Aegyptus, in Arabia, who had tried to instill such concepts in the people, and it had always been necessary to stamp such teachings out. A cult that promised salvation in the next world would inevitably weaken the common folk's loyalty to the state in this one. Thus the need for judicious relaxation, from time to time, of governmental restraint. The present campaign of executing the people's leaders, said Laureolus, flew in the face of wisdom.

"This man Timoleon, for example," the emperor said. "Must you make such a great thing of searching him out? You don't seem to be able to find him, and you're turning him into an even bigger popular hero than he already was."

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"Timoleon is the greatest danger the Empire has ever faced, Caesar. He is a spear aimed straight at the throne."

"You are too melodramatic sometimes, Apollinaris. I urge you: let him go free. Show the world that we can tolerate even a Timoleon in our midst."

"I think you fail to understand just how dangerous—"

"Dangerous? He's just a ragged rabble-rouser. What I don't want to do is make him into a martyr. We could crucify him, yes, but that would give the people a hero, and they would turn the world upside down in his name. Let him be."

But Apollinaris saw only peril in that path, and the search for Timoleon went on. And in time Timoleon was betrayed by a greedy associate and arrested in one of the Underworld's most remote and obscure caverns, along with dozens of his most intimate associates and several hundred other followers.

Apollinaris, on his own authority as head of the Council of Internal Security and without notifying the emperor, ordered an immediate trial. There would be one more climactic spate of executions, he told himself, and then the end of the time of blood would finally be at hand. With Timoleon and his people gone, Laureolus at last could step forth and offer the olive branch of clemency to the citizenry in general: the beginning of the time of reconciliation and repair that must follow any such epoch as they had all just lived through.

For the first time since his return to Roma from the provinces Apollinaris began to think that he was approaching the completion of his task, that he had brought the Empire safely through all its storms and could retire from public responsibility at long last.

And then Tiberius Charax came to him with the astonishing news that the Emperor Laureolus had ordered an amnesty for all political prisoners as an act of Imperial mercy, and that Timoleon and his friends would be released from the dungeons within the next two or three days.

"He's lost his mind," Apollinaris said. "Demetrius himself would not have been guilty of such insanity." He reached for pen and paper. "Here—take these warrants of execution to the prison at once, before any releases can be carried out—"

"Sir—" said Charax quietly.

"What is it?" Apollinaris asked, not looking up.

"Sir, the emperor has sent for you. He asks your attendance at the palace within the hour."

"Yes," he said. "Just as soon as I've finished signing these warrants."

The moment Apollinaris entered the emperor's private study he understood that it was his own death warrant, and not Timoleon's, that he had signed this afternoon. For there on Laureolus's desk was the stack of papers that he had given Charax less than an hour before. Some minion of Laureolus's must have intercepted them.

There was a coldness beyond that of ice in the emperor's pale blue eyes.

"Were you aware that we ordered clemency for these men, Consul?" Laureolus asked him.

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"Shall I lie to you? No, Caesar, it's very late for me to take up the practice of lying. I was aware of it. I felt it was a mistake, and countermanded it."

"Countermanded your emperor's orders? That was very bold of you, Consul!"

"Yes. It was. Listen to me, Laureolus—"

"Caesar."

"*Caesar*. Timoleon wants nothing less than the destruction of the Imperium, and the Senate, and everything else that makes up our Roman way of life. He *must* be put to death."

"I've already told you: any fool of an emperor can have his enemies put to death. He snaps his fingers and the thing is done. The emperor who's capable of showing mercy is the emperor whom the people will love and obey."

"I'll take no responsibility for what happens, Caesar, if you insist on letting Timoleon go."

"You will not be required to take responsibility for it," said Laureolus evenly.

"I think I understand your meaning, Caesar."

"I think you do, yes."

"I fear for you, all the same, if you free that man. I fear for Roma." For an instant all his iron self-control deserted him, and he cried, "Oh, Laureolus, Laureolus, how I regret that I chose you to be emperor! How wrong I was! —Can't you see that Timoleon has to die, for the good of us all? I demand his execution!"

"How strangely you address your emperor," said Laureolus, in a quiet voice altogether devoid of anger. "It is as if you can't quite bring yourself to believe that I *am* emperor. Well, Apollinaris, we are indeed your sovereign, and we refuse to accept what you speak of as your 'demand.' Furthermore: your resignation as consul is accepted. You have overstepped your Consular authority, and there is no longer any room for you in our government as the new period of healing begins. We offer you exile in any place of your choice, so long as it's far from here: Aegyptus, perhaps, or maybe the isle of Cyprus, or Pontus—"

"No."

"Then suicide is your only other option. A fine old Roman way to die."

"Not that either," said Apollinaris. "If you want to be rid of me, Laureolus, have me taken to the plaza of Marcus Anastasius and chop my head off in front of all the people. Explain to them, if you will, why it was necessary to do that to someone who has served the Empire so long and so well. Blame all the recent bloodshed on me, perhaps. Everything, even the executions that Torquatus ordered. You'll surely gain the people's love that way, and I know how dearly you crave that love."

Laureolus's expression was utterly impassive. He clapped his hands and three men of the Guard entered.

"Conduct Count Apollinaris to the Imperial prison," he said, and turned away.

Charax said, "He wouldn't dare to execute you. It would start an entirely new cycle of killings."

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"Do you think so?" Apollinaris asked. They had given him the finest cell in the place, one usually reserved for prisoners of high birth, disgraced members of the royal family, younger brothers who had made attempts on the life of the emperor, people like that. Its walls were hung with heavy purple draperies and its couches were of the finest make.

"I think so, yes. You are the most important man in the realm. Everyone knows what you achieved in the provinces. Everyone knows, also, that you saved us from Torquatus and that you put Laureolus on the throne. You should have been made emperor yourself when Demetrius died. If he kills you the whole Senate will speak out against him, and the entire city will be outraged."

"I doubt that very much," said Apollinaris wearily. "Your view of things has rarely been so much in error. But no matter: did you bring the books?"

"Yes," Charax said. He opened the heavy package he was carrying. "Lentulus Aufidius. Sextus Asinius. Suetonius. Ammianus Marcellinus. Julius Capitolinus, Livius, Thucydides, Tacitus. All the great historians."

"Enough reading to last me through the night," said Apollinaris. "Thank you. You can leave me now."

"Sir—"

"You can leave me now," said Apollinaris again. But as Charax walked toward the door he said, "One more thing, though. What about Timoleon?"

"He has gone free, sir."

"I expected nothing else," Apollinaris said.

Once Charax was gone he turned his attention to the books. He would start with Thucydides, he thought—that merciless account of the terrible war between Athens and Sparta, as grim a book as had ever been written—and would make his way, volume by volume, through all of later history. And if Laureolus let him live long enough to have read them all one last time, perhaps then he would begin writing his own here in prison, a memoir that he would try to keep from being too self-serving, even though it would be telling the story of how he had sacrificed his own life in order to preserve the Empire. But he doubted that Laureolus would let him live long enough to do any writing. There would be no public execution, no—Charax had been correct about that. He was too much of a hero in the public's eyes to be sent off so callously to the block, and in any event Laureolus's stated intention was to give the executioners a long respite from their somber task and allow the city to return to something approaching normal.

He reached for the first volume of Thucydides, and sat for a time reading and re-reading its opening few sentences.

A knock at his door, then. He had been waiting for it.

"Come in," he said. "I doubt that it's locked."

A tall, gaunt figure entered, a man wearing a hooded black cape that left his face exposed. He had cold close-set eyes, a taut fleshless face, rough skin, thin tight-clamped lips.

"I know you," said Apollinaris calmly, though he had never seen the man in his life.

"Yes, I believe you do," the other said, showing him the knife as he came

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toward him. "You know me very well. And I think you've been expecting me."

"So I have," said Apollinaris.

It was the first day of the new month, when the Prefect of the Fiscus Imperialis and the Prefect of the Fiscus Publicus traditionally lunched together to discuss matters that pertained to the workings of the two treasuries. Even now, many weeks along in the reign of the new emperor, the emperor's private purse, the Fiscus Imperialis, was still under the charge of Quintus Cestius, and the other fund, the Fiscus Publicus, was, as it had been for years, administered by Sulpicius Silanus. They had weathered all the storms. They were men who knew the art of surviving.

"So Count Valerian Apollinaris has perished," Cestius said. "A pity, that. He was a very great man."

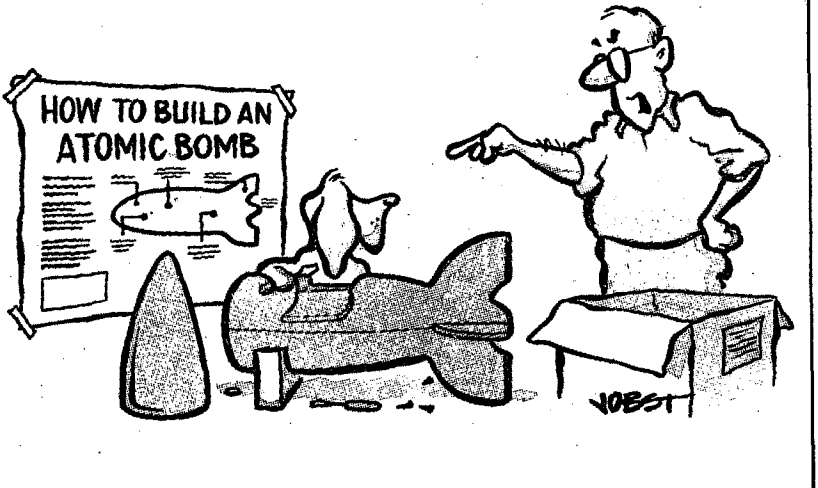
"Too great, I think, to be able to keep out of harm's way indefinitely. Such men inevitably are brought down. A pity, I agree. He was a true Roman of the old sort. Men like that are very scarce in these dreadful times."

"But at least peace is restored. The Empire is whole again, thanks be to Count Apollinaris, and to our beloved Emperor Laureolus."

"Yes. But is it secure, though? Have any of the real problems been addressed?" Silanus, that sly little man of hearty appetite and exuberant spirit, cut himself another slab of meat and said, "I offer you a prediction, Cestius. It will all fall apart again within a hundred years."

"You are too optimistic by half, at least," said Quintus Cestius, reaching for the wine, though he rarely drank.

"Yes," said Silanus. "Yes, I am." O



"Bad dog!"

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Introduction

Well, the seasons, they go round and round, and the output of the small presses continues to astound. The critical mass of new books from "alternative publishers" here at the Print Palace has resulted in the following review-explosion.

Novels and Novellas

Barrington Bayley is one of those shamefully overlooked *sui generis* writers that SF produces in abundance. A combination of Robert Sheckley, David Bunch, and Stanislaw Lem, Bayley tells tall tales that veer unexpectedly all over the fictional map, delightfully confounding readerly expectations. Two new novels arriving from Cosmos Books confirm Bayley's witty, wonderland plotting. *The Great Hydration* (trade, $12.99, 106 pages, ISBN 1-58715-510-9) concerns the arid, Vance-like world dubbed Tenacity by the first humans to reach it. Unfortunately for the inhabitants of Tenacity, this human embassy (on a ship sardonically named the *Enterprise*) consists of two mercenary traders, Karl Krabbe and Boris Bouche. Intent only on making a quick profit, the men swiftly destroy the whole world's ecology, despite some half-hearted intervention by one of their employees, Roncie Northrop. *The Sinners of Erspia* (trade, $15.95, 180 pages, ISBN 1-58715-511-7) offers similar blithe cultural destruction. Marooned on a strange planetoid named Erspia (the anagram with "aspire" seems intentional), the interstellar delivery man named Laedo must unriddle the artificial nature of the world and its creator, a super-being named Klystar. Laedo is soon voyaging, in fine Swiftian fashion, among several other Erspia-related worldlets, all of them established as bizarre sociological experiments. And the ultimate nature of Klystar is the biggest surprise in this continually self-regenerating book.

Certainly science fiction has benefited from one hundred years of codification. Established tropes and consensus histories allow easy engagement by readers and writers alike. But there is a sense in which proto-SF was wilder and more outrageous, simply because no borders had yet been established. We can see such primitive vigor in Camille Flammarion's *Lumen* (Wesleyan University Press, trade, $19.95, 153 pages, ISBN 0-8195-6568-7), first published in 1872. According to Brian Stableford—who provides a masterful introduction, translation, and notes—Flammarion (1842-1925) was something of the Isaac Asimov of his day, a popularizer and philosopher as well as novelist. Cast in the form of five dialogues between Lumen, a scientifically minded ghost, and his naïve terrestrial interlocutor, this book journeys to the stars to examine

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matters of physics, biology, and ethics, charting the virgin territory that future writers such as Stapledon would fruitfully plow. Upon arriving at Capella shortly after his death, Lumen finds the natives raptly watching goings-on in France via their extended senses. Out of such glorious, egocentric quirks were the foundations of SF built.

In the novella *Blood Follows* (PS Publishing, trade, $14.00, 90 pages, ISBN 1-902-880-34-X), the British fantasist Steve Erikson (not to be confused with the US slipstreamer Steve Erickson) extends the vision of his fantasy land of Malazan formerly contained only in his novels. In the blackly comic Lamentable City of Moll, Emancipor Reese, henpecked, middle-aged husband, is looking for a job. But the position he finds with Master Bauchelain proves to be more hazardous than he first assumed. Blending the barbaric color of Leiber with some of Cabell's drollery, Erikson propels his tale with vim and glee.

On Edgar Rice Burroughs's Mars, there lived a strange bipartite race. Half the race had the form of disembodied heads with some small appendages; the other half of the race were headless bodies. Of course, the former used the latter as vehicles. Out of this pulp cliche, Carol Emshwiller, in an unwaveringly futuristic voice, has fashioned a profound novel of amazing depth and intimacy. *The Mount* (Small Beer Press, trade, $16.00, 232 pages, ISBN 1-931520-03-8) takes place on a future Earth where an alien race of conquerors known as the Hoots employ subjugated humans as their rides. Our protagonist is Charley, a teenaged Mount who happens to be assigned to the Hoot child who will one day become the leader of the invaders. As the wild humans still at large launch a successful rebellion, Charley finds his loyalties torn between his master and his species. In the end, the pair forge a third way between the opposed camps. Dealing with issues of slavery and freedom and the awkward bonds between father and child, this novel belongs on the shelf with such classics as Tom Disch's *Mankind Under the Leash* (1966) and William Tenn's *Of Men and Monsters* (1968).

Lovers of the surreal will relish the reappearance of a 1942 novel by Maurice Blanchot in a crystalline translation by Jeff Fort. *Aminadab* (University of Nebraska Press, trade, $22.00, 202 pages, ISBN 0-8032-6176-4) is the story of a young fellow named Thomas who, walking through a strange village one morning, is enticed into a boarding house by the friendly wave of a woman in an upper-story window. Once inside, Thomas finds himself trapped in an impossibly huge warren of rooms and stairways and corridors, whose tenants form a society all their own, divided into renters, servants, and guardians of the obscure laws that govern their bureaucratic interactions. Like the quester in an allegorical tale by George MacDonald or David Lindsay, Thomas manages to pass through situations both weird and resonant that embody all the stages of life. Blanchot was exceedingly fond of Kafka, and here he manages to capture Kafka's simultaneously somber and manic worldview with keen-eared precision, producing an affecting fable.

In her debut novel, *Imago* (Wildside Press, hardcover, $37.95, 312 pages, ISBN 1-58715-379-3), Amy

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Sterling Casil succeeds in channeling the spirit of primo early Philip K. Dick, the fertile fellow who blasted out such social satires as *Solar Lottery* (1955) and *The World Jones Made* (1956). In Casil's just-around-the-corner scenario, Human Mutational Virus turns its victims into bestial parodies who become the subject of prejudice and legal maltreatment. Against this backdrop, the successor to Disney Enterprises, DisLex, under the rule of a megalomaniac named Harmon Jacques, strives to escape reality by creating a virtual environment known as PerfectTown. Harmon's only trusted advisor is an imago, a virtual construct modeled on the personality of Richard Nixon. In the middle of all this insanity are Julie and Frank Curtez. Julie works for DisLex and Frank is a lawyer. Soon, thanks to Harmon's schemes, they will find themselves running for their lives, their only friend a renegade Nixon. Employing a sharp, vigorous prose style, Casil propels her characters through her funhouse future with real zest.

A second debut novel also finds inspiration in the 1950s stylings of PKD, but infuses them with tinges of Walter Tevis's *The Man who Fell to Earth* (1963), as well as with the mordancy of Robert Silverberg and Barry Malzberg. Tim Kenyon's *Ersatz Nation* (Big Engine, trade, £9.99, 233 pages, ISBN 1-903468-07-8) is the tale of two parallel worlds: ours, and the unified globe—Unation—ruled by a machine intelligence named Mother Necessity. Twin narrative tracks intertwine productively here. The first concerns Patrick Dolan, the only Unation representative to regularly visit Earth. Dolan's job is to abduct people singled out by Mother and return them to Unation. Our other protagonist is Selmar Rayburne, a loyal drudge to Mother who also happens to be the seed of her undoing. As both Dolan and Rayburne grow dissatisfied with the status quo, events avalanche into a bizarre climax. Kenyon has a wild and prodigious imagination and his oddball Unation society reads like a conflation of all the best *Galaxy* satires ever written, with a special edge of weirdness all Kenyon's own. This is a writer to keep an eye on.

The recently deceased Laurence Janifer produced several books featuring Gerald Knave, Survivor, during his lifetime, and the latest book in this series, *Alienist* (Wildside Press, trade, $15.00, 223 pages, ISBN 1-58715-500-1), shapes up to be Janifer's final book to see print. Knave resembles not a little Harry Harrison's Stainless Steel Rat: an amiable rogue who lives on the fringes of society by his wits. In this adventure, Knave is hired to solve a locked-room murder mystery, twenty-fourth-century-style, involving other-dimensional beings. Replete with a timorous alien psychologist, a female cop love interest, a wise savant mentor, and an unlikely perp, this book floats mildly along on the strength of Knave's earnest yet wisecracking personality. There are no heroics or chase scenes, no interstellar battles or deep philosophical conundrums, but rather just a spirit of old-fashioned sleuthing with a stefnal edge. At times one wishes Janifer had aspired to higher artistic peaks, but the appreciative reader will be pleased in the end that Janifer felt free to follow his easygoing muse.

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A novel composed of linked stories, Chris Roberson's *Any Time At All* (Clockwork Storybook, trade, $14.95, 213 pages, ISBN 1-932004-00-9) is a blithe and giddy romp across the multiverse. The story of Roxanne Bonaventure, who comes into possession of a mysterious artifact permitting instant passage across all worldlines, this lighthearted tale combines the intricacies of Keith Laumer's *Worlds of the Imperium* (1962) with the sassiness of John D. MacDonald's *The Girl, the Gold Watch & Everything* (1962). Roberson threads his narratives with pop-culture brio—specifically, references to the Beatles and comics—and does not neglect his speculative physics either.

Single-Author Collections

On the evidence of his affecting, gripping, oftimes loony stories in *Strangers and Beggars* (Fairwood Press, trade, $17.99, 206 pages, ISBN 0-9668184-5-8), it would be fair to bestow on author James Van Pelt the revered title of fabulist. Van Pelt plays fast and loose with reality, conceiving of office environments where sharks cruise the carpeting and take down hapless workers ("Shark Attack: A Love Story"); and of a blow to the brain that allows an average man to suddenly see formerly invisible agents of death ("The Death Dwarves") and to become a Grim Reaper of sorts himself. But it is in such gentle pieces as "The Yard God"—a mix of Bradbury and Bixby, where a simple-minded girl with psionic powers must make a hard sacrifice—that Van Pelt shines with a kind of compassionate courage all too often lacking from much fantasy.

It's been twenty years since the last collection from Frank Robinson, and that's too long. But remedy is at hand with *Through My Glasses Darkly* (KaCSFFS Press, trade, $15.00, 115 pages, ISBN 0-935128-02-6). The five stories herein reveal Robinson to be fluent and adept in many modes. From the uchronia of "Causes" to the dystopia of "The Hunting Season," from the ecological disaster of "'East Wind, West Wind'" to the fannish fantasia of "Hail, Hail, Rock and Roll," Robinson never fails to entertain while still delivering important messages we need to hear. Although his recent books on the history of the field such as *Pulp Culture* (1998) have somewhat eclipsed his reputation as a fiction writer, Robinson stands revealed as a natural-born storyteller first and foremost.

Editor Mike Ashley, with his usual scrupulous devotion to concealed literary history the rest of us never knew, resurrects the collected Arthurian tales of Theodore Goodridge Roberts in *The Merriest Knight* (Green Knight Publishing, trade, $17.95, 523 pages, ISBN 1-928999-18-2), having excavated the pages of the 1950s' *Blue Book* to reclaim these high-spirited romps. The first half of the book concerns the adventures of Sir Dinadan, one of the least-serious members of the Round Table. With the light and witty hand of de Camp, Roberts sends his bard-turned-knight after giants and Saracen hounds, among other quests. The adventures in the latter half of the book are of a more serious nature, but still exhibit Roberts's easy touch. This book deserves a place on any fantasy-lover's shelf.

Four collections seem to go hand-in-hand, due to their shared somber,

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even morbid, worldview. From Brian Evenson comes *Altmann's Tongue* (Bison Books, trade, $15.95, 251 pages, ISBN 0-8032-6744-4), a book whose themes are murder and natural death in many guises and the human repercussions thereof. Evenson aims for an unsettling journalistic gravitas and indeed achieves a kind of continental clinical detachment most often associated with Ballard. But in "Job Eats Them Raw, With the Dogs: An Undoing," where we find the *skeleton* of Job reanimated to wander Diogenes-like through the world, Evenson evokes a kind of Lafferty-like laughter at the indignities of death. In Kurt Newton's *Dark Demons* (Delirium Books, trade, $15.95, 275 pages, ISBN 1-929653-27-1), the horrors are more pulpish and homegrown, but nonetheless still impactful. Half the stories here are making their first appearance anywhere, but all of them share the same loving attention to bloody details. Yet Newton manages to find horror in unlikely sources—a knitted afghan, a TV character called the Banana Man—and in a story like "The Pit," which begins "The pit came into existence several days ago. But, for me, it had probably been there all my life," he achieves allegorical levels of grace. The stories in *Aaaiieeee!!!* (Writer's Club Press, trade, $14.95, 203 pages, ISBN 0-595-21504-1) place Jeffrey Thomas midway on the spectrum between Evenson's chilly remove and Newton's total subjective immersion. With brutal elegance and chilling subtlety, Thomas pulls his readers into his dark visions immediately from every opening line. Whether told from the viewpoint of a sentient pistol ("Gun Metal Blue") or from the perspective of a whole village that exiles its malformed children ("John Sadness"), a Thomas story leaps boldly into its narrative and deals unflinchingly with such issues as genocidal guilt, Oedipal madness and workplace slaughter. Thomas's supernatural world is rife with terror, but also with mercy for the deserving. Finally, we encounter Brian Hodge's *Lies & Ugliness* (Night Shade Books, hardcover, $27.00, 386 pages, ISBN 1-892389-17-7). Hodge combines the grittiness of William Vollmann with the creepiness of early Ian McEwan and the savagery of Joe Lansdale to produce no-holds-barred assaults on decency, security and the American Way of Life. And this is generally, I think, a good thing! (Although reading this whole enormous collection in one gulp might lead to megrims and fantods.) When Hodge manages to factor in some Ray-Bradbury-style palliative tenderness, as in "Before the Last Snowflake Falls," which tells of a supernatural mortal debt between a young brother and sister, then he approaches perfection. And, as always, Jason Williams of Night Shade Books has turned out a collectible volume elegant in its presentation and a fine value for your money.

Paul Park doesn't write many short pieces, but when he does, the world should sit up and pay attention. With the wit of Thomas Disch and the sensitive surrealism of James Sallis, Park produces stories that are deceptively calm on the surface but roiling with tensions and drama below. The bulk of his short work is now collected in *If Lions Could Speak* (Cosmos Books, trade, $15.00, 194 pages, ISBN 1-58715-508-7), thus filling an empty

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space on the shelf reserved for "Essential SF Collections." In a story like "Get a Grip"—which outdoes *The Truman Show* (1998) ten ways from Sunday—Park's black humor comes to the fore. His social concerns surface in "The Last Homosexual," while the metaphysical quandaries of time travel get a workout in "The Tourist." Unafraid to utilize his own life metafictionally, Park proves that the quotidian and the fantastic intersect a thousand times during every time we blink.

The first Charles Stross story I ever really took notice of was "Dechlorinating the Moderator," from 1996, a wild con-report about an improbable nuclear fandom. But Stross is now a household word, deservedly so for his ultra-recomplicated and on-the-tip madcap extrapolations published in this magazine and elsewhere, and he's been in print since 1990. So it's somewhat remarkable that only now are we getting his first book, *Toast* (Cosmos Books, trade, $15.00, 188 pages, ISBN 1-58715-413-7). A scintillating foreword explains Stross's working methods and his theory of accelerating changes within society and the SF field, followed by ten stories that will, put simply, rock your world. A little less baroque than his current stuff, these pieces nonetheless prove that Stross is the heir of the cyberpunk fascination with the way the world works—or can be made to dance!

Just turned eighty years old, Bob Leman finally receives the enshrinement in book form that his masterful stories deserve. Handsomely crafted in a limited edition by Midnight House, *Feesters in the Lake* (hardcover, $40.00, 330 pages, ISBN 0-9707349-5-6) collects all of Leman's fiction, the majority of which first saw the light of day in the pages of *F&SF*. Combining many of the virtues of Clifford Simak, Avram Davidson, and Manly Wade Wellman, Leman writes stories that are not so much old-fashioned as timeless. Whether horrific or science-fictional, these tales are compulsively readable and authentic, solidly constructed entertainments that never pander. Whether the shocks delivered are swift, as in "Window," where an interdimensional doorway leads to a world of deceptive monsters, or slow and lingering, as in "Olida," which concerns the Selkirks, an inbred race of horrors, the ultimate impact of these tales will insure that they linger in your memory long after the book is closed.

I've been marveling over the compact, outré stories of Carol Emshwiller for more than thirty years now, ever since encountering her "Sex And/Or Mr. Morrison" in *Dangerous Visions* (1967). Thus the news that she has a new collection out, and that the collection includes seven hitherto-unpublished pieces, is joyous news indeed. *Report to the Men's Club* (Small Beer Press, trade, $16.00, 270 pages, ISBN 1-931520-02-X) proves once more that Emshwiller has no peer when it comes to producing tiny, begemmed, self-contained universes, each utterly different from its sisters, yet somehow all bearing the unique Emshwiller stamp of off-kilter wisdom. Consider just one, "It Comes from Deep Inside," wherein a self-confessed "second-rate" painter manages to insinuate herself into an oddball artists' colony, with life-altering results. A vivid landscape barely contains the

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humor and wisdom distilled here, and Emshwiller manages to make us laugh and cry simultaneously.

Anthologies

Oversized in production values, roster of talent and editorial ambition, *J.K. Potter's Embrace the Mutation* (Subterranean Press, hardcover, $40.00, 334 pages, ISBN 1-931081-45-X) is clearly one of two stellar anthologies from 2002. (The other is covered next.) Compiled by Subterranean's publisher William Schafer and award-winning critic Bill Sheehan, this volume centers around Potter's eerie photo-montages. Great writers such as John Crowley, Liz Hand, Michael Bishop, Graham Joyce, and nine others take Potter's art as their starting point, producing mostly horrific tales that catapult the reader into unexpected dimensions. Joyce's sex-infused "First, Catch Your Demon" is my personal favorite of the collection. Bishop, James Morrow, and Kim Newman leaven the mix with acidulous humor. Pete Crowther conflates Ray Bradbury and HPL in his evocative period piece "Breathing the Faces." And Ramsey Campbell provides the quietest kind of British horror in "No End of Fun," which nonetheless manages to be creepier than a dozen splatterpunks combined. Embrace this book now!

If *Leviathan 3* (Ministry of Whimsy, trade, $21.95, 468 pages, ISBN 1-894815-42-4) contained only the single story by Jeffrey Ford titled "The Weight of Words," in which hapless Calvin Fesh gets entangled with the mad genius Secmatte, who can make printed words into instruments of his will, then this volume would still be an essential purchase and a bargain at that. Of course, such is not the case, since editors Forrest Aguirre and Jeff VanderMeer have actually assembled over two dozen wonderful stories from such luminaries as Carol Emshwiller, Brian Stableford, Michael Moorcock, and Stepan Chapman into an omnibus of wonder. Arranged with loving care into five divisions bracketed by the surreal bibliophilic fables of Zoran Zivkovic, these contemporary myths circle around matters of identity, love, wonder, and transformation like a flock of graceful hawks riding thermals. In "The Evenki" by Eugene Dubnov, a secret race of humanity with strange potentials is discovered lurking amidst homo sapiens. I think all the writers in this volume must belong to such a race.

The latest theme anthology from Circlet Press centers around the erotic uses of telepathy. Edited by Cecilia Tan, the stories in *Mind & Body* (trade, $14.95, 131 pages, ISBN 1-885865-21-X) run the gamut from near-mimetic to fantasy to cyberpunk, and reflect a variety of ingenious approaches to the topic. I particularly enjoyed Evan Hollander's "ESX," a kind of Walter Mitty exploration of office sex on a mental plane, and "The Arena" by Nik Flandré, which takes the hoary notion of aliens using humans for combat sport and twists it through sexual angles. It should be noted that the eleven stories are split almost evenly between male and female authors, lending this collection a pleasantly heterogeneous ambiance.

Four aspiring graduates of Clarion 1998 have banded together under the group name of the "Ratbas-

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tards" and, in their pursuit of the literary life, now offer a sampling of their work in the collection *Rabid Transit* (Velocity Press, chapbook, $5.00, 46 pages, ISBN unavailable). Christopher Barzak's "The Blue Egg" tells of the mysterious eponymous artifact and how it changes one woman's life, much in the manner of a Kit Reed tale. "The Psalm of Big Galahad," by Barth Anderson, is a ribofunky quest tale that brings to mind Norman Spinrad's work. Alan De Niro's "A Number of Hooves" is a surreal tale that would have been at home in Moorcock's *New Worlds*. And Kristin Livdahl's tale of a miraculous garden growing amidst ghetto grief, "Even a Worm Will Turn," strikes me as something that might have flowed from the pen of Kris Rusch. All in all, a strong debut volume from some new talents.

Turbocharged Fortune Cookie (Turbocharged Fortune Cookie, chapbook, $3.00, 37 pages, ISBN unavailable), on the other hand, has more the feel of a wide-ranging magazine than a collective showcase, featuring an interview with Patricia McKillip as well as an assortment of prose and poetry and criticism. Gavin Grant's "The Bird of Words" is one standout, with its unforgettable portrait of writer as a man haunted by a dire totemic beast.

Easily the most impressive debut of any small press original anthology in recent memory, *Polyphony Number One* (Wheatland Press, trade, $16.00, 219 pages, ISBN 0-9720547-0-7) features top-notch stories from big names such as Andy Duncan, Lucius Shepard, and Carol Emshwiller, as well as work by equally talented yet often overlooked folks such as Ray Vukcevich and Bruce Holland Rogers. Additionally, strong first appearances by Vandana Singh and Victoria Elisabeth Garcia herald a pioneering desire to usher newcomers into print. Editors Deborah Layne and Jay Lake state their brief passionately in their foreword: to tread the trail broken by such series as Damon Knight's *Orbit,* venturing into slipstream waters for the best in fantastic literature. Their whole venture offers a breath of exciting freshness, and if subsequent volumes live up to this one, we may all one day look back at this first issue as a landmark in the field.

I wish I had the space to synopsize and comment on all the fine stories in *Agog! Fantastic Fiction* (Agog! Press, trade, AUS$21.95, 286 pages, ISBN 0-958056-70-6), but, alas, such is not the case. Let me nonetheless try to convey the merits of this important showcase from Down Under, compiled by editor Cat Sparks. Nearly thirty Australian writers—including such well-known names as Stephen Dedman, Damien Broderick, and Terry Dowling—contribute original stories in nearly every conceivable genre mode and style, proving that our austral neighbors understand and practice SF as wholeheartedly and inventively as we do here. There's not a loser in the lot, and it's unfair to cite just a few, but I'll do so anyway. Claire McKenna's "Stealing Alice" is a blend of Greg Egan and Cordwainer Smith. Deborah Biancotti's "King of All and the Metal Sentinel" conjures up memories of Brian Aldiss's "But Who Can Replace a Man?", Kate Orman's "Ticket to Backwards" dramatizes inadvertant time-travel in the manner of Michael Bish-

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op's "The Quickening." And Geoffrey Maloney's "The Imperfect Instantaneous People Mover" is a PKD-Sheckleyan romp. Send away for this collection and feel a new kinship with our Australian peers.

Miscellaneous Titles

Charles Platt is a legendary gadfly in our field, a combination of H.L. Mencken and P.J. O'Rourke. His heartfelt convictions about SF, expressed with sometimes savage wit, are on display in *Loose Canon* (Cosmos Books, trade, $19.95, 228 pages, ISBN 1-58715-437-4), a collection of his essays spanning the eighties and nineties. (Platt's archived longer-length journalism, mainly for *Wired* magazine, is viewable at that magazine's website.) Whether dismantling shibboleths such as commodified fantasy novels or exposing the illogical aspects of SF publishing, Platt is never less than passionate, funny, and sincere. His presence is needed to keep us all honest, and this collection remedies his lack of a more periodical column.

Those who know Ian Watson only as a superb writer of prose are in for a treat. His poetry, collected for the first time in *The Lexicographer's Love Song* (DNA Publications, chapbook, $5.00, 60 pages, ISBN unavailable), exhibits all the same verbal facility and philosophical heft of his fictions. Divided into four sections, the books spans the realms of "love, trauma, otherness and lunacy." Yet what might sound like a mordant journey is anything but. Watson's zest and sprightliness practically bounce off the page, and a poem such as "Marsupials in Our Midst," telling of an encounter between one lonely man and an alternate species of humanity, is ripe with melancholy laughter. Watson joins Michael Bishop and Tom Disch as one of our genre's bards.

Another sly fellow with more than one arrow to his quiver is Stepan Chapman, winner of the PKD Award for his novel *The Troika* (1997). With *Common Ectoids of Arizona* (Lockout Press, chapbook, $5.00, 41 pages, ISBN unavailable), Chapman exhibits a flair for cartooning akin to William Rotsler's. Ectoids, Chapman tells us, are wandering ectoplasmic lifeforms, and his book purports to be a guide to them in all their eerie variety. Droll captioned B&W cartoons illustrate many such lifeforms interacting with mankind, often to the dismay of the unlucky souls who encounter them. Chapman's glee at his imaginary taxonomy is palpable and contagious.

Richard Moore's charming graphic novel *Far West* (2001) about a tough female bounty hunter is now followed by *Boneyard: Volume One* (NBM, trade, $12.95, 96 pages, ISBN 1-56163-316-X), which exhibits the same genial adventuresomeness and easy-flowing, humorous B&W artwork. Youthful Michael Paris inherits from his grandfather a cemetery in the spooky, perpetually shadowed town of Ravens Hollow. But the boneyard proves to be inhabited by a sexy vampire named Abbey and her friends, who include a werewolf, a talking raven, several gargoyles, a witch, and other assorted Bradburyesque denizens of the night. The townspeople view Michael's arrival as an excuse to demolish the cemetery and rid themselves of these unnatural citizens. But

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Michael ends up siding with his new supernatural friends, who must confront the real bad apple behind the anti-spook campaign. Combining the charm of Peter Beagle with the slapstick antics of Warner Brothers cartoons, Moore's *Boneyard* is an all-ages trick-or-treat.

Also from NBM comes the second installment of the tale begun in *Gipsy: The Gipsy Star* (2000): *Gipsy: The Fires of Siberia* (trade, $10.95, 56 pages, ISBN 1-56163-326-7). Collaborators Marini and Smolderen propel their tough-guy Romany trucker and his feisty little sister across a future arctic zone inhabited by resurgent Mongols, terrorists, treacherous executives, and an heir to the Russian czardom. The art is sexy-crazy-cool, the action is non-stop, and you'll be wanting more faster than you can say "Mad Max of the North."

My one substantial face-to-face encounter with the legendary Judith Merril—author, editor, critic, and all-round vortex of energy—occurred during one Readercon some years ago. On a panel with the elderly leonine Merril, I sought to praise her with the old platitude about a new generation seeing farther because we stood on the shoulders of giants. Merril instantly shot back, "You're not standing on *my* shoulders, kiddo!" And there you have the woman in a nutshell: prickly, witty, and justifiably proud of her epic accomplishments. These qualities and many others emerge blazingly from her posthumous autobiography, *Better to Have Loved: The Life of Judith Merril* (Between the Lines, trade, CAN$29.95, 282 pages, ISBN 1-896357-57-1). Assembled from scraps, fragments, previously published essays, and polished manuscripts by Merril's grandaughter, Emily Pohl-Weary (who has done a superhuman job and deserves immense credit), this book ranks with Damon Knight's *The Futurians* (1977) for its insights into the field, most essentially the SF of the late forties, early fifties, and swinging sixties. But Merril's tale hardly ends there, and she has much to offer on later developments, including the caustic and damnably concise statement about 90s SF: "Science fiction has become a money field." Read this photo-filled book for a lesson in how candor, passion, and zeal can conspire with talent and history to produce a unique figure whose like we will not soon see again.

For someone who, by her own admission, did not discover the non-book aspects of SF (prozines, fandom, critical journals, historical studies, etc.) prior to 1992, Justine Larbalestier has become remarkably savvy in her chosen field. So much so that her new book, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (Wesleyan University Press, trade, $19.95, 310 pages, ISBN 0-8195-6527-X), breaks exciting new ground and streams like a breath of fresh air through the fusty, fossilized discussion about feminism in SF. By going back to the dawn of SF's birth and unearthing old, forgotten discussions of the role of women in the field, as well as relevant overlooked stories, Larbalestier forces the reader to acknowledge that the consensual story about the mass arrival of women writers in the 1970s into SF is false and misserving of the more complex truth. Without any axes to grind, Larbalestier wields a sharp wit and perceptive insights on a huge mass of material, forcing us to re-see

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what was in front of our eyes all the time. Her discussions of Philip Wylie's *The Disappearance* (1951) and the career of James Tiptree, Jr., alone are worth the price of admission. And her chronicling of Isaac Asimov's early letter-column chauvinism is a coup. By casting SF as "a series of social activities" and by not being afraid to get personally involved, Larbalestier has forged a book that honors the spirit of Merril and other women pioneers in our genre. O

Publisher Addresses

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SF Conventional Calendar

Is February gives way to March, the level of convention activity picks up. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me a SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

FEBRUARY 2003

28–Mar. 2—**ConDor.** For info, write: **Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.condorcon.org. (E-mail) info@condorcon.org.** Con will be held in: San Diego CA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Del Mar Doubletree. Guests will include: none announced at press. The tenth annual event.

28–Mar. 2—**SentiCon. www.senticon-michigan.com.** Radisson East Airport, Grand Rapids MI. Adult fanzines.

28–Mar. 2—**MarsCon. (612) 724-0687. www.marscon.org.** Airport Hilton, Bloomington MN. J. C. Brown, Lev Mailer.

28–Mar. 2—**Left Coast Crime. www.leftcoastcrime2003.com.** Hilton, Pasadena CA. Robert Crais, S. Feder. Mysteries.

MARCH 2003

7–9—**ConSonance. www.consonance.org.** Crowne Plaza, Milpitas CA. T. Kimberley, Fairbourn. SF/fantasy folksinging.

7–9—**Starfleet Region 2 Conference. www.omnifacets.com/region2/summit.** Ramada, Madison AL. Star Trek.

7–9—**MeCon. www.mecon.org.** Senior Common Rooms, College Gardens, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Peter Hamilton.

14–16—**StellarCon, 5701 Running Ridge Rd., Greensboro NC 27407. (336) 294-8041.** Radisson, High Point NC.

14–16—**RevelCon, Box 17364, Austin TX 78760. fb_mercury@hotmail.com.** Houston TX. Adult fanzines.

14–16—**StormieCon, 9526 Midland Blvd., Overland MO 63114. (314) 426-8774.** Ramada, St. Charles MO.

15–16—**Sci Fi Expo and Toy Show, Box 941111, Plano TX 75094. (972) 578-0213.** Plano Center. Commercial event.

16–18—**London Book Fair, 26 The Quadrant, Richmond TW9 1DL, UK. (44-0121) 252-4047.** London. Trade show.

19–23—**ICFA, V. Hollinger, CSP, Trent U., Peterborough ON K9J 7B8. www.iafa.org.** Ft. Lauderdale FL. Academic.

21–23—**LunaCon, Box 3566, New York NY 10008. info@lunacon.org.** Hilton, Rye NY. S. & J. Robinson, Rowena.

21–23—**MillenniCon, 143 Schloss Lane, Dayton OH 45418. (513) 659-2558.** Kings Island Resort. N. Kress, E. Mitchel.

21–23—**CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533. (228) 435-5217. www.coastcon.org.** Gulf Coast Convention Center.

21–23—**GalactiCon, Baumgardner, 6636 Shallowford Rd., Chattanooga TN 37421. galacticon@vei.net.** Ramada So.

21–23—**Anime Oasis, 420 9th Av. N., Nampa ID 83687. www.animeoasis.org.** Best Western Vista, Boise ID. Senshi.

21–24—**Ad Astra, Box 7276 Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. (905) 305-0827.** Colony Hotel. Moorcock, R. Gould, A. Lee.

23–26—**Days of Honor, Box 53695, Cincinnati OH 45239. www.kag.org/events/doh.** Star Trek's Klingons.

28–30—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. www.iconsg.org.** State U. of NY. Day-tripper event; no hotel near.

28–30—**FiLKONtario, 145 Rice Av. #98, Hamilton ON L9C 6R3. (905) 574-6212.** Sheraton, Toronto. SF folksinging.

28–30—**Creation, 1010 N. Central Av., Glendale CA 91202. (818) 409-0960.** Pasadena (CA) Center. Commercial Trek.

28–30—**ThePrisonerCon, Box 66, Ipswich IP2 9TZ, UK. www.portmeiricon.com.** Portmeirion UK. TV-show's locale.

AUGUST 2003

28–Sep. 1—**TorCon 3, Box 3, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1A2. www.torcon3.on.ca.** Freas. WorldCon. C$250+/US$170+.

SEPTEMBER 2004

2–6—**Noreascon 4, Box 1010, Framingham MA 01701. www.noreascon.org.** Boston MA. William Tenn. WorldCon. $140.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow, Scotland. US $115/£75.

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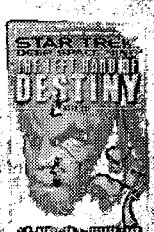

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